

Philomene's Marriages

1888


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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

TO

PHILOMÈNE'S MARRIAGES.

TO MY AMERICAN READERS.

READERS, you who take the trouble to buy my book and to read it, though you afterwards should curse the unlucky author, who offers you exactly the contrary to what you desire: a gay story when you are in a bad humor, a sad one when you have every reason in the world for wishing to be amused—permit me to introduce myself to you. So many absurd things have been said about me, that a little truth, I think, will do good to every one.

In the first place, my readers, it has been said

that I am Russian, that my husband is Russian, and that my education was Russian. Nothing is more untrue. I was born in Paris, where I was educated in the bosom of my family; and then the time having come for me to earn my own living, I followed my father to Russia. It was there I became acquainted with the language and the customs of that country. But I had married a Frenchman, and our love for our native land drew us homewards. At first I began by passing a few months every year in France, and my countrymen seemed to me as interesting to study as Russians. They had not for me the attraction of the unknown; but I had strengthened my faculties of observation, and I remarked a thousand points of interest in them, where others only saw every-day life, the *common-place* of home existence. The yearning towards our country became so strong that seven years ago we returned to Paris; and here it is that I have written all my works, except one short novel and two or three stories.

CHAPTER II.

A PROPOSAL.

THE night had come. Philomène, who, as we have said, did not dislike good eating, was just about removing from the fire a veal cutlet with its usual accompaniment of green peas, and inhaled with a voluptuous melancholy the appetizing odor of her supper. Voluptuously, one understands why, with melancholy, because meat is so dear! An indiscreet hand knocked twice on the door, and immediately a visitor entered.

"Ah! it is you, Monsieur Lavenel?" said Philomène, in a tone that had nothing engaging in it.

"Yes, neighbor, it is myself; do I disturb you?"

The widow had had time to cover the saucepan and to deposit it on the hearth; she approached the intruder, saying to him:

"Oh! no; oh! no!" exactly as though she had said: "Oh! yes; oh! yes!"

"You see, I gathered some cherries a little while ago, before the rain, Madame Crépin—they are not wet, don't be afraid—and I have brought you a few."

The few cherries quite filled a basket, which their owner placed on the table, with that sort of pride which it is agreed to call modesty.

"But, Monsieur Lavenel, I shall never eat all those!" exclaimed the widow, a little softened.

"You can make them into preserves," returned the gallant visitor.

"Sugar is so dear," murmured Philomène, contemplating the cherries with a sad eye.

"Bah!" said the bachelor, with an easy air; "in your position one can procure one's self many sweets!"

"That is where you deceive yourself," energetically answered Madame Crépin. "You must not imagine that I am well-off; I have hardly enough to make the two ends meet, and only do so by depriving myself of everything!"

"Anyhow, don't deprive yourself of cherries; here are some, that only ask to be eaten."

Lavenel, with an absent air, plunged his hand into the basket and took out a handful of fruit, which he began to nibble slowly, keeping the stems and pits in his left hand. Philomène looked at him with a curious air; he raised his head and met her look, which instantly became full of sweetness.

"Happily," thought Lavenel, "I know you—or otherwise I should think you as sweet as honey. Ah! that would be an illusion!" As this phrase could not be translated into civilized language, he added, out loud:

"You distress yourself a great deal, do you not, Madame Crépin?"

"About what, my dear Monsieur?" the widow asked, prudently.

"Why, about everything! At being alone, at being a widow, for having lost your children—" Philomène wiped her eyes. "At seeing your affairs drag on so long without ending— Do you wish me to say something? It needs a man to carry on all that! You will never get out of it all alone!"

"They have told me so," observed Philomène, with a wise air. After half a second, she added: "But I have no relations near enough to burthen themselves with my affairs."

"It is not necessary to be related, in order to help one another, neighbor," returned Lavenel, after having allowed an appreciable time to clapse, as though he had been meditating his answer: "I am not a relation of yours, but if I can be of service to you in anything—"

"Oh! Monsieur Lavenel, you know very well that that could not be! What would they say of it round about?" said Philomène, modestly, lowering her eyes.

"They can say what they choose, neighbor, and then, all that they might say would not, perhaps, be far off from the truth."

Philomène, who had remained standing until then, sat down, turning her back to the light, and Lavenel, in order to master his eloquence the better, laid on the corner of the table the little heap of stems and pits that he held in his left hand.

"They will say, you have friendship for me, and that I have the same for you. As far as concerns myself, at least, they will not lie, for I have friendship for you, Madame Crépin, and a great deal of it!"

Madame Crépin smiled faintly, and her interlocutor sat down opposite to her.

"If you would," continued he, confidentially, "we might make a pair of friends; you are in a nice position—"

"Ah! neighbor, I am very poor; I do not know who could have spoken to you about my position; certainly, it is not an enviable one!"

"Well, then, neighbor, you must change it for another," triumphantly concluded Lavenel.

"You talk very easily about it," murmured Philomène, making some little folds in her apron, which she held in her left hand.

"You have only a word to say, Madame Crépin," professed Lavenel, rising and placing his hand on his heart; "Theodore Lavenel, grain and flour merchant, offers you his hand and his fortune!"

Philomène continued to gather together two or three more little folds of stuff, then she opened her hand and let them all escape at once.

"You do me a great deal of honor, neighbor," she answered, in a wheedling voice.

"Do you accept?" cried the grain and flour merchant, making a step towards her.

"Excuse me, neighbor, I do not like trade," said Philomène, with the same sweet voice.

Lavenel stood stupefied, his mouth half open; "nothing had made him foresee this answer.

The widow was not in the habit of being, according to the language of the country, "more amiable than is neces-

sary," and certainly she had received her visitor very well, until then; the latter might have therefore prided himself on her especial kindness: whence came this unexpected refusal? This he asked her as soon as his surprise permitted him to speak.

"I do not like trade," repeated Madame Crépin, with an amiable smile, "you know it well, neighbor; for since I have been in the world, I have not ceased saying so."

"That is not a good reason," replied Lavenel; "one might not like trade and still not dislike a tradesman."

Madame Crépin smiled again, and lowered her eyes; then her face regained an expression of resigned sadness.

"Neighbor," said she, "after all the sorrows I have had, after having loved my poor husband, as I loved him, the thought, even, of marriage is very painful to me;—and then," added she, without looking at her pursuer, "my mourning is not even finished."

"As you will, neighbor," replied the grain and flour merchant; "this, perhaps, is not your last word."

He went towards the door accompanied by Philomène, who looked at him askant. With his hand on the latch, he turned.

"I have an idea," repeated he, "that this is not your last word."

"Perhaps not," said the widow, with a nod of her head.

Before the astounded Lavenel could utter a word, he was already in the street and the door was shut.

"The odd woman!" murmured he, as he regained his shop; "if she had not her few *sous*, I would send her to the deuce, the conceited creature!"

' While the subject of this discourse, returned to her entlet, with a smile as enigmatical if not as sweet as the "*Jocondès*," Monsieur Lavenel entered his home, where his mother was awaiting him behind the counter, knitting indigo-blue woollen stockings, the dye coming off on her fingers.

"Well?" said the old woman, pushing her fifth needle under the band of her Normand *coiffe*, with its two winged-like sides looped up.

"She refused," said her son, with a sullen air.

"Refused! but not really—not entirely?" replied the cunning old peasant.

"No! not entirely. How could you know, mother, that she only half refused me?"

"Because I know this *Crépin* woman; she is an arrant coquette, and a vain creature."

"There is, however, no reason for her being so," murmured Lavenel, thinking of the yellow hair and pointed nose of the lady of his thoughts.

"Ah! yes, son, there is a reason. Master Toussaint's under-clerk passed here a little while ago, when you were in town: the *Crépine* has some valuable land, near Pieux, worth fifteen thousand crowns at least, and what is more, once her accounts of heritage are settled with her husband's debtors, she will have five or six thousand francs in ready money. The late *Crépin*'s family has consented to yield her the credits coming to the estate, on condition that she pays the legal expenses."

Lavenel remained thoughtful; his mother looked at him, as she was knitting, and patiently awaited the fruit of his reflections.

"Does she know it?" asked he at length.

"I do not believe so. The under-clerk told me the letter only arrived this morning."

"She will be prouder still," growled Lavenel. "Ah! if I were only not in need of money!"

He threw his hat on the counter with a gloomy air.

"There are other girls or widows in the world," observed his mother.

"Yes, but the devil willed it, that I should have a fancy for that one, formerly. I wish I may be hanged if I know why. She was pretty in former days—before her marriage."

"She has gotten well over it," philosophically observed Madame Lavenel. "Beauty is a perishable gift."

"Yes, she has gotten over it; and yet, I know not why, when I see her faded as she is, something stirs my heart; it is, perhaps, because I loved her so much in past times. If I marry her now, it will be in order to beat her; yes, to be at her at my ease!—so as to revenge myself for all her impertinences."

"Did she say neither yes or no to you?" Madame Lavenel asked, as she went to shut the shop door.

"She said no, and then after, she said perhaps; you well know her cursed habit of never saying anything positively."

"It is a wise habit, my son," replied the old Normand

woman ; “it would be better to imitate it, than to blame it.”

“It is wise when it profits ourselves, but it is very disagreeable when it does us harm,” answered her son, as he followed her into the back shop for supper. “But never mind that, I’ll catch her yet, that widow Crépin—I’ll catch her surely, and when she is my wife she shall pay me back for all my cringings.”

CHAPTER III.

HUNTING A HUSBAND.

THE following Sunday Madame Crépin made her appearance in the church at Diélette, in a bonnet trimmed with lilac and white marguerites; a pretty, quite new lilac cravat displayed itself under her chin, and proclaimed to all that her mourning was over. Mourning in the country, which is much more severe than that worn in large cities, ordains black for two years; half-mourning colors not daring to make their appearance before the expiration of that period, and as Madame Crépin had loved her husband a great deal, there were some rigorous persons who declared she ought to have waited at least six months before she left off entire black.

"Do leave the poor woman alone," said stout Madame Aubier to a group of matrons, who were sharply criticising the widow's marguerites; "what matters it to you whether she wears lilac or green at her neck? Has she mourned her husband any the less because of it?"

"There was no reason for mourning for him so much," proffered an angular neighbor. "In his lifetime she complained enough, and said he never came on shore without leaving her with a child on her arms!"

"Leave the dead in peace," continued the good soul; "the Captain and his children sleep tranquilly under their

crosses; it is very little matter to them now whether Madame Crépin wears mourning for two or ten years!"

"She will marry again soon," said another friend and neighbor; "Lavenel goes there every day."

"Well! what if she should marry again?"

"After all the affected airs she put on at the time of the Captain's funeral!"

"It was because she has a tender heart," cunningly glided in a third friend and neighbor; "she loved her first husband very well; she will love her second one still better!"

"Ah! but you see the first one had a very great merit, that perhaps the second would not have: he was scarcely ever with her!"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Madame Aubier, "what bad tongues women have!"

Far from taking this remark as an injury, the neighbors and friends grouped themselves around the stout lady.

"They don't talk as much about you," said the boldest, "because you, Madame Aubier, are neither proud nor wicked. If everybody was like you, the world would go on better!"

"Come! come! That's very well," said the excellent creature; "for love of me, since I am so good, try then to disparage your neighbor a little less!"

"There are neighbors, and neighbors!" exclaimed a last kind tongue behind Madame Aubier, who was going away, quite out of breath, towards her house, and who could not reply.

The subject of this conversation had returned majestically to her home amid many scrutinizing looks. When her door was shut, she approached the damp-covered mirror, and raised herself on the points of her large feet, in order to contemplate therein the effect of her ribbons. Lilac was becoming to her, that was incontestable; under the rûches and flowers of her bonnet her face assumed an unwonted sweetness. Philomène had been handsome, rather than pretty; her regular features, once delicate, had grown large, and sunburn had hardened her skin. As she was, when an amiable expression animated her face, she was still good-looking; but in repose, in her everyday dress, nothing could deceive one from seeing she was thirty-eight years old, and that she wore her years bravely.

With a certain complacency, she untied the strings of her bonnet, and placed it on a candlestick that held a candle, giving it the effect of a mushroom; then she put on a white muslin cap, and proceeded to prepare her dinner.

While taking her repast ~~solitarily~~, Philomène went over in her mind the events of her life. This day was a sort of solemnity to her—a kind of new era in her existence. None of the remarks whispered in a low tone in the church, none of the scrutinizing and curious glances directed at her bonnet, had escaped her, and with the surety of memory that characterizes people who bear rancor long, she had classed them all in her mind, so as to revenge herself at her leisure, according to time and opportunity.

But the important result she had obtained destroyed

the bitterness of all those sarcasms. In laying her mourning aside openly she had prepared people's minds for a second marriage, and when this event should take place, it would be a surprise to no one.

"Yes, I will marry again," said she to herself, in order to entertain herself. "Yes, certainly! After having passed the best years of my life in waiting for a husband who was always absent, I will marry again, and I will wed a very good-looking and very nice man, who will always remain with me."

This thought inspired her with an idea to go and look in her cellar for a bottle of wine—ordinarily she drank cider; in order to make a feast for herself of this day's solemnity, she poured out a glass of old Bordeaux, which the Captain had brought home in days past, and continued the current of her meditations.

"But I must have a husband of a different stamp from Lavenel. A pretty bird, truly, that poor man, with his prune-like eyes and his Punch's nose! He is not even five feet high! I must have a large, handsome man, such as my late husband was, only younger. I don't wish to give people cause for laughter!"

On this reflection Philomène dipped a biscuit in her wine, and ceased talking to herself, so as to reflect in silence. The Captain's memory, which had been brusquely thrown in the midst of her plans for the future, had evoked many far-off thoughts. She had always been proud, and in the small village they had declared her to be "unmarriageable." Several aspirants, chosen by

relations, and tacitly accepted by herself, had found themselves ousted at the end of a few weeks, without anything on their part having been a motive for this insult. Each marriage that failed was not long in being followed by some new demand, and certain persons thought they remarked that the new-comer had some advantages over the old ones. Philomène made of the pretenders to her hand a sort of social ladder, of which she pitilessly broke the rounds as soon as she found a higher one.

This original manner of elevating herself had won for her a number of criticisms, some harmless, the others bitter, on the part of the discarded persons and their families. They spoke jestingly of "Philomène's marriages," and soon there could not be found in the country a man bold enough to pay her court. Besides, the young men recognized the uselessness of their efforts; although the young girl's *dot*, who was an only child and her parents' inheritor, was modest enough even for that country, it was clear she would marry neither a merchant nor a farmer, and these two classes were about the only ones to which she could pretend. There still remained at Diélette a notary, several retired merchants, and the captains of some small coasters; but the first sought a wife from a higher sphere, the second were too old, and were besides—for the most part—married, and the last were of too small account. Philomène entered her twenty-seventh year without having found the husband of her dreams.

She possessed at Granville a cousin younger than herself, an amiable, pretty, merry girl, full of amusing originality;

this latter had a very strange fate. She was scarcely eighteen years of age, when a novelist, then unknown, had come to take sea-baths at their beach. The young man, who was inflamed with a desire to write, there composed his best romance, for he fell desperately in love with the pretty *Crevette* fisher, and married her at the end of three months. Never had folly a happier ending! The young woman was intelligent; she understood that she owed it to her husband never to make him blush for her, and she learned all that she ignored. With a rare wisdom, and one that could not have been expected in her, she desired to remain at Granville until she became perfectly polished; her husband acceded to this desire; what did Granville or Paris matter to him, provided his wife was with him? The small personal fortune which he possessed permitted him to live liberally in the country; while in Paris it would have given him hardly the necessaries of life. A sojourn of three years in that interesting country, in the midst of continuous application, was at least as useful to Charles Verroy as to his wife, for he carried away from thence a ripe, original talent that soon won him a position.

Just as Philomène—wearied with awaiting at Diélette for a husband who did not appear—had decided to go and seek for one elsewhere; she heard of her young cousin's projected marriage. It was a good opportunity for seeing the country: Philomène ordered herself a gown and bonnet, and left, to be present at the wedding.

It was a magnificent wedding; all Granville was present,

for the marriage of this young girl without fortune or education with a gentleman from Paris who had four thousand francs income, seemed as fabulous to the people of the place, as if a king had married a shepherdess. For it must not be forgotten, that thirty years ago this country was yet a virgin land to the footsteps of people from the outer world. Among the guests was a merchant-captain, who had recently arrived from Brazil to see his mother; Philomène was amiable, she was pretty, she was known to possess some fortune. The marriage was arranged in the twinkling of an eye; and three months later she was Madame Crépin.

She held, at last, the ideal dream of all her life: to be the wife of a conspicuous person.

It is something to have gained one's end, and many among us leave this world without being able to boast of having done so; but the end one pursues in life is not a silver service, placed at the top of a greased pole: it is a moving cloud that changes form, as one makes one's way on the road of existence. Madame Crépin's end had been to be Madame Crépin; but when she was in possession of this title, she wanted something else.

At first she would have liked not to have been encumbered with a brood of children; Heaven in its bounty accorded her five: it is true, she lost three of them in an epidemic, and two shortly after, which gave her rest. But it was eight years of her happiness and her ambition lost, for one is not of much account one's self, when one is surrounded by cradles. Just as she was beginning to enlarge

her fortune, and embellish her home, the Captain had an unlucky fall and fractured his skull. Philomène found herself a widow.

Her sorrow was great, for this narrow-hearted woman had loved her husband. Her love was rather material; the better part of ourselves, the disinterested tenderness, the simple kindness that we feel in our affections, when we possess an elevated soul, had little in common with the jealous and hot-headed passion that characterized Philomène; but this passion was love, and Madame Crépin sincerely mourned her husband. Then, after a few months, a peculiar feeling, a sort of well-being, quietly came over her. It had been very doleful to see the earth cover the Captain's coffin, but it was certainly something to be able to listen to the wind moaning around the house with the sweet peacefulness of having no one out at sea. "Rage, tempest, rage!" Philomène, who was addicted to monologues, would say: "thou troublest me no longer now!" When other people's children were screaming enough to rend one's ears, she was wont to throw a quiet look around her well-arranged little home; there were no mischievous fingers to write with preserves on the furniture, no playthings on the floor, no linen hung at the windows, no broth to make in the evening, no small stockings to mend at night; and a sort of pleasant tremor passed over Philomène as she thought of her peaceful, present life.

The well-thinking reader, and especially if the reader be the mother of a family, will be indignant with the author,

and exclaim loudly that such monsters do not exist. A thousand pardons, men and women readers, they do exist, they are to be found everywhere; perhaps in your tailor, your shoemaker, your washer-woman, your cousin's son-in-law, dear madame, when she lives no more; your brother-in-law's nephew, dear sir, who will mourn for him deeply and properly with a very sincere heart; who will give him a superb funeral; and a year after, while wiping the glasses of his *lorgnette* at the opera, will think that, after all, he did very well to die, since his death procures for him the possibility of such sweet pleasures. Such feelings are not confessed, they are not even felt in a very definite manner: they remain in a vague and embryo state; but if the dead, even those who are sincerely mourned, should think of coming back and reclaiming their goods, how they would be sent before the courts, with their right of troubling the living contested!

So Philomène was happy in her tranquillity, which nothing troubled any more, and this happiness had lasted about ten months, when a gnawing worm glided into her bosom. With the Captain had disappeared the renown of her position. A merchant-captain is a personage; and then he brings home from his distant voyages extraordinary objects, strange gifts, and fancy things that "cannot be found for gold or silver in any shop." Each one of his returns is awaited and commented upon; his departures are an event in the small village where his family resides. He is given commissions for the other side of the ocean. But when the Captain dies, his widow

is of very little importance. She falls into the rank of neutral, unclassed beings, unless she has a large fortune; for as every one knows, a large fortune is the best of gifts.

How should she regain her vanished prestige At first the widow occupied herself anxiously in realizing the greatest amount of money and real estate possible, and, thanks to divers negotiations, made half-willingly and half by force, she obtained from her husband's family a much larger share than she deserved. But how could one refuse a woman who had had five children and so much sorrow? Was it not very natural to accord her a little well-being for her old age? Although Philomène had made her husband quarrel with all his own people from the first month of their marriage, the Crépin family acted honorably. The sole point on which it showed itself recalcitrant, was that of the recovering of the credits, and even there they were obliged to yield in the end, as the notary's under-clerk had informed Madame Lavenel.

Her fortune was thus assured, but it was a very paltry fortune—something about eighteen hundred francs income. A woman who had refined tastes like Philomène could not be satisfied with so little; besides, she had always dreamed of buying a piano. Not for herself, for she had never had leisure to learn music; in spite of the great desire to do so that she had manifested in the first days of her marriage, the Captain had only laughed at it, saying that when one was twenty-seven years old it was too late to become a *virtuoso*; she desired one for the persons

who should come to see her, should those people know how to play on it. Now, with eighteen hundred francs income, one cannot buy a piano, even though it should be a kettle-drum.

Well, then, what remained? At thirty-seven years of age life is not over. There are women who marry for the first time when they are thirty-seven and even thirty-eight years old! They are old maids, it is true, but a widow of thirty-eight is a young widow, and can aspire to a young and "well-made husband," as they used to say formerly.

The young and well-made husband was an agreeable perspective; but far more brilliant still was what he might bring with him. The Captain's grade became—as in former times Philomène's aspirants—a ladder, no longer a modest ladder, a little nothing of a ladder, but a pedestal on which to mount up higher.

Lavenel! He was a fine aspirant, in truth! However, grain and flour merchant though he was, Lavenel must not be rebuffed. The wise always reserve a year for thirst; and then, who does not know that immutable decree that a woman who is courted attracts gallants, just as the light attracts moths? Philomène needed a jumping-jack at the end of a string, to show the entire world that she possessed the power of making the ambitious hearts of men who were seduced by her charms and her money, bound. Lavenel made a good jumping-jack. He was well enough known in the village and in the neighborhood for Philomène to feel flattered at hearing

whispered: "He wants to marry the widow Crépin very much!" She thought his mother disagreeable enough, it is true; for first, the mother of the man she would marry would be naturally disagreeable to her; and then, Madame Lavenel was too proud, too silent, too far-seeing.

Philomène only liked imbecile people around her; she sovereignly despised them, but she did not need to esteem her neighbor. There are persons who cannot live with those whom they despise; the widow Crépin, on the contrary, would have liked the earth to hold no others. It is so sweet to reign over those who surround one, and to say to one's self, morning and evening, on opening and shutting one's eyes to the light: "All those people are simpletons, and I lead them at my good pleasure!" Philomène was enjoying within herself the sweetness of this thought, when the letter-carrier knocked at her door. Thinking it was only the *Channel Light-House*, she rose with an absent air, and took two steps. To her great surprise, the carrier laid the journal and two letters on the bureau.

CHAPTER IV.

AN OLD SUITOR.

TWO letters! Who could have written to her—unless it were her notary? But he had written her the day before, to announce to her the happy success of her negotiations. Philomène looked at the two letters for a long while, weighed them in her hand, smelt of them carefully, and at last began with the lighter and less elegant-looking one.

It was from a Parisian debtor, who being informed that she was charged with the recovery of the credits of her husband's heritage, wrote to announce to her that the state of his affairs would not permit him to pay her immediately; that, besides, her credit had not been proved in a proper manner, and that finally he should carry the affair before a council of referees. Philomène knit her eyebrows that were as white as those of an Albino, put the letter in the envelope, and the envelope in a drawer, and mentally sent the debtor to the devil.

After that operation, the widow Crépin turned to the second envelope, that remained on the corner of the bureau, and looked at it askantly. Was it, also, this stupid letter, going to bring her some disagreeable news, and thus spoil the pleasure of such a beautiful day? This mysterious epistle had, however, rather a pleasing air: the

paper was handsome and heavy, and 'besides it did not come from Paris. After a short moment's hesitation, Madame Crépin tore the envelope.

Why do they put gum even into the most ignored corners of envelopes? Why is it that one can never open them till after a deadly struggle? Is it so necessary that manufacturers should condemn one to a bodily combat with that unseizable and soft enemy, which we call a sheet of lined paper—a combat, where one's teeth are often, and as last resource, the instrument of slaughter? It is a question, which we lay before the jury for prizes at the Exposition, in order that it may decide whether the secrecy of correspondence is better guarded by such violent measures than by a simple seal.

After having made every effort to open the letter she held in her hand, Philomène went in a very bad humor to her work-box, armed herself with a pair of scissors, and thrust in their points, and, as generally happens in such cases, she cut the sheet of paper in two, which at last she drew forth, glorious, but mutilated, from its protecting sheath.

Then Madame Crépin sent to the devil—probably to keep the Parisian debtor company, who perhaps found it lonely there—the scissors' maker, the envelope-seller, and the person who had written to her, after which she looked at the signature.

"Marie Verroy!" It was Marie, her cousin from Granville, who had written to her after five or six years of absolute silence! Philomène thought she must desire

to borrow money of her, and put on her most severe expression, just as if the young woman were opposite to her in person. Gradually her face smoothed itself out—as much as it was in its power to do, not any more though, nevertheless—and she ended in really smiling when she came to the signature. Marie remembered her, and recalled to her some pleasant days passed together formerly, sometimes at Granville, sometimes at Dielette, when their parents made each other their annual visits, and asked if she could not find for her in her vicinity, one or two rooms for a few days. They were making an excursion along the coast, and would like to stop about a week at that pretty little miniature seaport.

“But certainly, certainly!” Philomène answered, out loud: “the room is already found—the one I have on the first floor; and you can stay here, my dear cousin, as long as it seems pleasant to you!”

The joy and glory of having Charles Verroy in her house, a celebrated man, a novelist, whose works were displayed in the windows of booksellers at Cherbourg, at Coutances, and even elsewhere, made Philomène insensible to the expense. She immediately appreciated what this honor was going to cost her: she would be obliged to have two meals a day, with meat and vegetables, a few fowls—Philomène raised some in the small court-yard preceding her garden—a little fish; and the Captain’s wine would receive rather a rude assault. Yes; but all Dielette would be aware that she sheltered the celebrated

Verroy, her cousin; and, then, a kindness is never lost, and that is why one should have a generous soul!

Philomène took a chair and drew towards her the Captain's travelling ink-stand; it was a heavy machine, with a spring cover, that went off sometimes by itself in the middle of the night, causing the large gray cat sleeping in the chimney-place, frights, that were as sudden as inexplicable. Black streaks all around it proved unmistakably that rust had not always respected it; however, Philomène experienced a worthy pleasure in writing from the Captain's ink-stand; it was one of the things that gave her importance in her own eyes.

She wrote on paper with a wide, black border—she had never been able to find a border sufficiently wide, and if one had listened to her, it would have been necessary to have manufactured some especially for her, with a thickness two fingers and a half wide; in her eyes, it was an elegance that constituted luxury, as understood by fashionable people. She wrote, therefore, on very correct paper, and her legible, flowing writing, soon covered the first page, not without a slight tendency towards climbing heavenward—but Philomène had such high aspirations!

“My dear cousin,” wrote Madame Crépin, “your letter gave me great pleasure, proving to me that you had not forgotten me; nor have I either forgotten you—I have thought of you constantly. You know, doubtless, about my sorrows, and of my poor husband's death; Captain Crépin left me in a very sad position; in spite of that, my—”

Here Philomène wrote the word "poverty." Then she stopped to reflect. It did not enter into her plans that they should think her poor; so she artistically effaced the word *poverty* with the end of her little finger, which made on the fine paper bordered with black a very ugly, grayish spot; but the widow's esthetical ideas did not go so far as to blame this summary, infantine procedure of erasing a displeasing expression. Instead of "poverty," she put "modest circumstances," and continued:

"Does not prevent me from offering you the little I possess. You, my dear Marie, and also my cousin Charles, will find in my home a very simple hospitality, but offered with a warm heart, and I hope you will find yourselves sufficiently pleased to remain a much longer time than you have at present the intention of doing."

This epistle finished, not without one or two little blots, that Madame Crépin made likewise disappear with the end of her finger, which gave them the appearance of long-haired comets, thrown out in shadow on a light sky, the widow re-read it, examining with care whether some malicious fault in spelling had not glided in among the difficult words; there were, in truth, one or two, but they escaped her investigation, and the post carried them off the next day towards Granyville, together with many others of like calibre.

On the afternoon of this memorable day, Philomène went out to take the air. All that Diélette held that was nice was walking on the beach, admiring one of the most beautiful sunsets that could be seen. The sea, blue as the

Mediterranean, furled gently with pretty foam-like fringes over the impalpable fine sands; the sun disappeared gradually in a light cloud of golden vapor, and the English islands were thrown out in the distance, violet colored, on the gilded, or as one might say, incandescent sea and sky: the white cliffs of Aurigny arose opposite and seemed quite near. The bay of Vauville, that incomparable bay, shut in by two magnificent promontories, has but one fault, which is a merit: that of being unknown. When the day comes that tourists shall have invaded it, it will be perfect and insupportable like all celebrated places.

The inhabitants of Dielette are *blasé* in regard to the magnificence of their sunsets, and we have never heard it said that the place has given birth to a painter? Talk after that of the preponderant influence of natural beauty on the artistic development of a people! However the sweetness of the evening, the beauty of the spectacle had touched the most surly, and all—even a former mate, who, since his retirement, invariably turned his back to this sea, which he despised on account of its tranquil waters, after so many stormy campaigns—all looked towards the west, attracted in spite of themselves, by so much brilliancy and such an intense display of splendor.

Madame Philomène went like the others on the beach, clad in the lilac insignias of her new situation, and stopped here and there to exchange a good-evening with different persons.

It is proper to say here, that in spite of her ambition and its momentary realization, Madame Crépin had never

been admitted into what formed the nucleus of fashionable society in the maritime village. Her origin was not the cause of this restriction, but rather the dear lady's haughty airs. When first married she desired to be first among the first, but to achieve that, she would have been obliged to have taken some one's place. Now, the first held to their rank, which was natural, and Philomène, who, with more patience, might have insinuated herself adroitly towards the goal of her desires, found herself repulsed with that cold politeness that makes one feel so sensibly the distance between the great ones of this world, and simple mortals, like Philomène, you or I.

Madame Aubier, who was in the best society, did not make herself so exclusive; and Madame Crépin had free access to her house. However, to her grand dinners she was not often invited; only, when they found themselves thirteen, in order to be the fourteenth; or else when some great personage declined, and they were only eleven. Twelve being such a sacred number that the mistress of a house cannot receive eleven guests! To do so, the arrangement of the repast would be totally destroyed.

Philomène stopped by Madame Aubier. Turning her back to the ocean—for all those who were walking there presented it their faces—she planted herself before the good lady. After the preliminary parleyings, she went straight to her point, full of glory, and puffed up with pride.

"I shall have some people staying with me the coming week," said she, with an assured tone.

"Relations from the country?" asked Madame Aubier, innocently.

"Some Parisians!"

This response was pronounced with the modesty of a collegian talking of his success with women.

Two curious persons approached. Parisians! I think even now not many are met with at Diçlette in the course of a year; but, at that time, it was a thoroughly extraordinary event. Enchanted at the little effect she had produced, Madame Crépin continued, without being able to contain the exuberance of her joy:

"The celebrated novelist, Charles Verroy, my cousin, and his wife are to pass a week with me."

They opened their eyes wide. The name of Verroy had not penetrated very far into the bosom of this people, of whom the most part ignored Victor Hugo's name, and never imagined that at that very moment the poet in his land of exile, opposite to them, was perhaps contemplating France gilded by the rays of the setting sun. But Verroy was a celebrated novelist, Philomène declared it—and that extraordinary man was coming to Diçlette! Some opened their eyes enormously; others, skeptical by nature, shrugged their shoulders, murmuring: "There is Philomène bragging again!"

Madame Aubier, who was always indulgent and always practical, received this astonishing news with calmness, and after a second's meditation,

"Where will you lodge them, Philomène?" said she.

"At my house, in the room I have on the first floor!

They are sensible people, my dear Madame Aubier ; they are reasonable enough to understand I cannot offer them a palace, and to be contented with the little I possess."

Madame Crépin had at her service about a half dozen analogous phrases, all relating to her modest position ; she must have gleaned them from novels, which formed the foundation of her reading ; for, related to a man of letters, she prided herself on being literary, and even imperturbably held, rightfully or wrongfully, criticising opinions on works that had had the unhappiness of displeasing her. These phrases were known to the entire village, from its having heard them a thousand times ; and at that place in the conversation, two ladies maliciously pushed each other's elbows in exchanging the quarter of a smile, but Madame Crépin did not see them.

"Madame Lavenel !" called Madame Aubier. . .

The old woman who was passing turned towards the group her head, dressed in the Normand *coiffe*, which has now fallen into such desuetude, and is replaced by a small working woman's cap, which is far from equalling it, either in picturesqueness or elegance ; but seeing Philomène Madame Lavenel approached slowly.

"Here is our neighbor, who is going to throw herself among great people," said Madame Aubier, smiling faintly. "Fancy ! she is going to receive some Parisians !"

"She is mistress to receive whom she likes," answered the old woman.

Her cunning eye scrutinized the face of her whom some

day or other she thought to have as daughter-in-law ; but Philomène swallowed her pride with so modest an air that she could draw no inference from her examination. Lavenel joined his mother unaffectedly, and the neighbors continued to walk slowly along the road. Insensibly, Philomène and her admirer found themselves walking in front, at a short distance from the others.

"You are going to have some pleasure—distraction, Madame Crépin," said the grain and flour merchant, dressed in his Sunday best—clad in a brown overcoat, and a high hat that did not embellish him.

Madame Crépin sighed.

"I have not stolen a little distraction," she answered ; "after so much sorrow—"

"Humph!" said Lavenel, from the depths of his low and rather thick voice. "Ah! Madame Crépin, the best distraction always is the society of a good husband."

"Ah! that is very true," moaned the cunning gossip. "When my poor Crépin was alive, I knew no greater satisfaction than to have him with me."

"The devil take all widows!" Lavenel thought ; "they have a rage for talking to one of their dead husbands!" Then he continued, out loud :

"Forget that sad past, Madame Crépin ; and then, in other times, when we were a girl and boy, we called each other by our first names ; during your husband's lifetime I lost the habit of so doing, but why should we not take it up again now, when it cannot shock any one?"

Madame Crépin not answering, her lover waxed bolder.

"Listen, Philomène," said he—"Philomène" had passed his lips like a letter thrown in a letter-box, and he continued, in a tenderer tone:

"It is no use to ruminate over what no longer exists—it is better to put something else in its place; you said *no* to me, but it is not *no*—it is *perhaps*. Well, you must say *yes*, and make yourself a pleasant existence. You told me your affairs were not arranged with the late Captain's family?"

The late Captain's widow not replying, he finished his phrase:

"You must trust me with all that, and it will not last long!"

"That is to be seen, neighbor," answered the lady of his thoughts. "Perhaps they will decide to let me have what they owe me."

"You wish to make me believe that," thought Lavenel. "Fortunately, the under-clerk has spoken! Sly jade!"

"Philomène," he went on, out loud, "I have sought you for a long while. I asked you to marry me nearly twenty years ago; you would not have me—"

"If you think you have grown handsomer since then," thought the widow, "you are greatly mistaken!"

"And I—I have always wanted you!" ended the emboldened bachelor. "My mother has tormented me times enough to make me marry. She has been to see brunettes and blondes enough, so as to induce me to marry them; but I had only thought for you, bad one, and I did not

wish any one else. So long as the Captain lived, I resigned myself to it all, because, you see, it is not worth while to make one's self unhappy about what one cannot obtain; but when I saw you a widow, then I said to my mother that I did not wish any other wife than you, and she answered me: 'Well, my boy, if it is Philomène you want, you must take her!'

"On condition that she wishes it," rectified the widow Crépin.

"I will end by winning you," the grain merchant answered, insidiously; "besides, I am not a match beneath you, as far as fortune goes. One makes a great deal by selling hay and bran; I have fifty thousand francs in trade, and a pretty roan snare—"

"I don't like roan horses," replied Philomène, with a dreamy air.

Philomène was not wrong, for "roan" horses, spotted with brown and white, are not esteemed in the market on account of their coat.

"We can change it, if it is only that," said Lavenel, with a conciliatory air.

"There is something else," answered the widow.

"What, then?"

"That I do not wish to marry again."

"With no one?"

"With no one for the present, but I may change. When do you think you will have made your fortune, Lavenel?"

"Why, in ten years."

"If you will give me your money," added he, paren-

thetically, in the profoundest depth of his mind. That is what is called a mental reservation; and thanks to this simple reservation, people who are in good favor with heaven can tell, without lying, the greatest falsehoods in the world. At least, that is what we are commanded to believe under pain of eternal fire. Perhaps Lavenel did not believe enormously in fire eternal; but he had a blind faith in the utility of mental reservations in what concerns the affairs of this world.

"Well!" said Philomène, "we will see, when you have made your fortune."

Lavenel was as prudent as an old cat; yet he could not help bounding at this, and the incongruous gesture drew upon him the attention of several *Dillettois*, who were little accustomed to see him indulge in *choreography* in public. He calmed himself at once, and reassumed the peaceful pace of an honest tradesman taking a walk, thanks to Sunday's repose.

"Ten years, Philomène! you are making fun of me! But, my dear, in ten years, I shall be fifty, and you—I am not rude enough to mention a woman's age; but, the devil! we made our first communion together, and that's not a few years ago! Do you wish us to make people laugh?"

"Well, Lavenel!" said the widow, in a soft voice, "don't let us marry! Ah! heavens! It is not I who ask it!"

"Bang!" said the flour merchant to himself, overcome by the falling-in of the edifice reared with such trouble since ten minutes.

"Well! good-evening, then," said he out loud, raising his hand to his hat.

"Will you not take me as far as my home?" asked the village Celimène, with the most distant air in the world.

Lavenel, who was stupefied, put his hat on his head again and docilely followed Philomène to her door.

Every one was still on the jetty; the dogs alone, who were lying on their masters' thresholds, animated the deserted place.

"Will you allow me to kiss-you?" politely said the flour merchant, removing his hat entirely.

For all answer, Philomène tendered him, one after the other, her two cheeks, with their prominent cheek-bones deeply colored, and received on each a resounding kiss, that made two or three dogs, more nervous than the others, apparently, raise their heads.

"Good-evening, neighbor," said the widow, entering her house.

"Good-evening, neighbor," answered Lavenel. He took two steps, and, having reflected, he thus expressed (always mentally) the result of his meditation:—"I am in for what I have said: may the devil take her!"

CHAPTER V.

"THE PARISIAN" AND HER COUSIN.

THE following Thursday, an odd carriage, a combination of jaunting-car, *cabriolet* and simple cart, deposited Monsieur and Madame Verroy before Madame Crépin's house. The entire village, either visible on the square, or invisible behind window curtains, assisted at this *débarcation*. They saw with pleasure that "the Parisian" was much prettier than her cousin, and with regret that she wore a very simple black dress without trimmings, exactly like a person of the place. The simplicity of her attire and the small volume of her luggage determined the assistants to disperse, especially as it was necessary to relate the event to those who, less fortunate, had not been witness of it.

Madame Verroy overthrew all established ideas in regard to feminine appearance in relation to character: for instance, a fat person is infallibly as gay as a greenfinch; a dark, tall person, with regular features, is noble and serious, or else melancholy—or else withered and sour. Endeavor to affirm the contrary, and you will see how you will be treated by your readers. Marie Verroy, through a spirit of contradiction, doubtless, was tall and slender, a brunette, handsome rather than pretty, and with this, of an unfailing gayety. This gayety, that shone forth amidst all storms,

was her principal attraction, and, better than any one, her husband knew what merit Marie possessed, in offering to all, and continually, her kind face and infectious laugh.

As soon as they had alighted from their extraordinary vehicle, the only one they had been able to find, and when this mysterious wheelbarrow had taken the road towards its home, with inclining ways that must have caused frightful fear to the passers-by, the newly arrived persons were conducted by Philomène into a small, white-washed room, furnished with a bed, a table and two chairs, but, in spite of this simplicity, very pleasing, thanks to some geraniums of a splendid red color that were placed on the window-sill.

"Behold, all I possess!" said Philomène, showing some ugly teeth that the brush rarely disturbed in their quietude. "I am poor, my friends, and can only offer you a poor abode."

"But we will be very well off here," exclaimed Marie, "if only you will have the goodness to increase our ration of water, for what there is there will not be sufficient to wash our hands."

Madame Crépin looked with an astonished air at the miniature pitcher in the middle of its bowl, that was smaller still. What a singular fancy to ask for so much water! Was it to drink? She could offer them cider in preference, for hers was of a good growth—she did not fear to say so.

"No, my good friend," answered Marie, laughing, "it is not to drink, and cider would not be what we wish. A good, large jug of fresh water—that is what we need for the moment."

Philomène, who made her toilette by dipping the end of a towel in the pitcher, which she afterwards passed lightly over her face, said to herself "that her dear cousin was a trouble-maker;" but without any other objection, she brought the jug that contained her daily supply.

"Thanks," said the young woman to her; "and now in five minutes we will be at your disposition."

Madame Crépin disappeared, and the husband and wife remaining alone, looked with the same impulse at the wash-stand; then, raising their eyes to each other, they burst out laughing together.

"Why do you laugh?" asked Marie.

Charles pointed at the bowl and the jug, and, without saying a word, passed the corner of his pocket-handkerchief around his face.

"It is the usual procedure here, it seems—it is summary and not expensive."

"Evil speaker!" his wife answered him; "you will do well not to make our cousin wait."

"Especially as she has not an obliging look. She has not grown prettier since ten years."

"What could you expect, my dear? Age and sorrows—"

Five minutes after they were, in effect, seated at Madame Crépin's table. It was a round table, or rather a stand, on which it was extremely dangerous to place anything except in the middle, for the lightest weight made it infallibly tip over. It is not known why this piece of furniture, that is unserviceable on account of its inconvenience, should be in high favor among the small provincial *bourgeoisie*.

The dinner was good, even very good. The defunct Captain's wine made its appearance at dessert, with some cherries sent by Lavenel. This latter, not knowing from which side the wind would blow, wished to win over the travellers; and, in truth, the fruit was duly praised, and the name of their owner passed Philomène's lips.

"Ah! but your neighbor is gallant!" said Marie, returning to the cherries.

Philomène lowered her eyes. Seeing she did not reply, Madame Verroy looked at her—the dear soul would have much liked to have blushed, but one does not blush at will; however, her embarrassment could not have failed "to put out a blind man's eyes," as Charles said.

"Has he any intentions?" asked the latter, smiling.

"Ah! cousin, after so many sorrows, you do not suppose that I could think—"

"You! no, cousin; but this gentleman, perhaps, has not had sorrows; what is more natural, then, than that he should think of preparing some for himself?"

"Oh! cousin!"

Philomène put her handkerchief to her eyes.

"But certainly, cousin, one prepares sorrows for one's self when one loves some one who does not care for one, and since you do not care for him—"

"He is not what I want," said Philomène, with a dignified air; "if I could ever think of marrying again, it would not be a grain merchant who could make me forget the Captain."

"Ah! it would not be a grain merchant?" repeated

Charles, incapable of containing the maliciousness that irritated him; "his social position is not high enough?"

His wife gave him a warning blow under the table, that nearly disturbed the equilibrium of the dessert; but Philomène just then was not disposed to understand his raillery.

"No," said she; "if ever I should change my name, I owe it to my late husband not to descend below my present rank."

She rose to serve the coffee, and turned her back on them with so much dignity, that Charles followed her with a respectful look that was full of admiration. His wife tried to look out of the window, and to calm a fit of uncontrollable laughter that shook her inwardly. Philomène returned with a waiter loaded with cups.

"Certainly," said she, continuing her thought, "it would not be worth while to have been the wife of a merchant-captain, to wed a simple tradesman; and, then, besides, I always detested trade—"

"But," insinuated Marie, who had regained her calmness somewhat, "if the tradesman pleased you?"

"Oh, Marie! after so many sorrows, can you believe that any other man than my husband could ever be anything to me?"

"No, no, cousin!" Charles hastened to reply, "we do not believe it; we have misunderstood. Is he a handsome fellow, this gentleman of the cherries?"

"He is not bad; but the Captain was much better. Lavenel has straight hair, and he wears his beard under his chin, which is ugly."

Charles contemplated Philomène with a growing admiration; for all his wife pulled him by the sleeve, he did not take his eyes off her.

Madamè Verroy succeeded in turning the conversation, and asked to take a walk. Philomène led them everywhere that one could go on dry land, and brought them home so fatigued that they went to bed without supper.

Before closing his eyes, Verroy could not help saying to his wife:

"Our cousin is superb! She will be married before three months! She is a type!"

"Leave her alone," answered good Marie, "it is not nice to make fun of her; does she not do everything to please us?"

"But I am very well off here, and I thank her for her hospitality; only she will marry her flour merchant."

"I do not believe it," said Marie.

"Why?"

"I don't know; but I do not believe she will marry him."

"Well, then, she will marry another!"

"As for that, it is very possible."

"She would do better not to pretend to the contrary."

"Charles, my dear," said his wife to him, "you think yourself at Paris: don't forget that we are in Normandy!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE MOSS-GROWN HOUSE.

“**H**OW lovely this beautiful country is! How it knows how to make itself loved, and what regret one feels to leave it! Say, Marie, would you like us to buy a little house here?”

“All that you wish, Charles—one or several! Are there any houses to sell about here, Philomène?”

Philomène, who was walking in front of her friends, turned and stopped on the border of the narrow road.

“There are, and there are not; those that are for sale are uninhabitable, and those that are habitable are not for sale.”

“Admirable!” said Charles, laughing; “but to let, cousin?”

Philomène started off walking again: “To let, no; there are none.”

“Then, Marie, we must give up this dream, or else go a little farther away.”

“I would have preferred to keep you near me,” said Philomène, in a tender tone. “Here it is only five days that we have been together, and one would say so accustomed have I grown to you, that I had never been separated from you.”

“Good, Philomène!” said Marie, tapping her affectionately on her shoulder.

"It is a misfortune of my character; I am too loving; I attach myself too quickly, and so only prepare sorrows for myself."

"Come, cousin," said Verroy, in a conciliatory tone, "the world is not solely peopled with selfish and ungrateful persons."

"I did not mean to say that," said Philomène, in a voice full of tears; "but, you see, I am so unattractive! Who could think of growing fond of me? I have no more relations—no friends—"

"Well, and me?"

"Yes, my good Marie, you are right; I am wrong also to speak to you of my griefs. The unhappy should not afflict the happy ones of this world with their sorrows—"

Charles, who was slightly impatient, knocked off with his cane the flowering heads of a half-dozen shrubs planted along the roadside. This little emotional scene was not the first one he had witnessed; and Verroy, whose criticising sense had been sharpened by observation, had asked himself, since a few moments, whether Philomène were a good creature, whom provincial life and a particular aptitude made naturally insupportable, or whether she were simply a pretty specimen of a "false, good woman!"

While he was thus *guillotining* the flowers on the cliff, Marie had gone ahead, and, taking Philomène's arm, had lavished on her all the ordinary consolation that one offers in similar circumstances. Something astonished the young woman: she, who always so readily found kind words in

her heart when brought in the presence of some wretchedness and misfortune, found nothing to say but ordinary commonplaces.

"It is because we have not seen one another for so long," she said to herself in explanation; "we love each other still, but we know one another no longer!"

Silence came. Philomène replaced her handkerchief in her pocket, and the three pedestrians walked along on the same line, the path having grown broader.

Suddenly, through one of those surprises so frequently occurring in that extraordinary country, a small valley opened on their left.

In the valley ran a stream—a plaything of a stream; a mathematician would have calculated that its mother—the spring—did not give out more than twenty litres an hour. But the pretty stream cared little for mathematicians and mathematics; it was not near being imprisoned in cast-iron tubes for public alimentation and salubrity. It ran along, playing innocently in the sunshine, stopping here and there in a thick tuft of cresses, between banks of mint, among enormous clusters of reeds; and, after having fallen a dozen times over large stones, according to the common destiny of all that exists and advances in this world, it lost itself among the pebbles, and disappeared, drowned in the waves of the sea.

A hundred yards farther on in the valley rose a cluster of trees. How do the branching beech-trees, that resemble miniature Banian fig-trees, manage to brave the wind? how do the ash-trees, that are sheltered by the beeches,

succeed in overtopping their protecting barrier? and how, sheltered by one and the other, do the apple-fields stretch out lazily over the gently undulating hill-tops? The farmers of the country know not the reason why, and savants, who study arboriculture in books, ignore it still more; but the beeches know, and that is why they bend their reddish-gray tops, whose foliage lasts so short a time under the wrath of the ocean tempests. Their branches, that are so closely entangled in each other, form an impenetrable refuge, and behind their double high and mossy hedge vegetation, that is bathed by the warm currents of the Gulf stream, displays itself in an almost insolent luxury.

Amid the cluster of trees a small gray house sheltered itself, that was covered with superb lichens, that dotted themselves in great brilliant yellow spots on the old granite background; above the front door, that was low and narrow, might be read, deeply graven in an enormous stone in characters three inches high:

F. B. P. JOSEPH HENSEY, 1757.

An old moss-covered stone trough, a gray wooden fence, eaten away by lichens, two stone balls that had formerly crowned the stanchions of the front door, were the only ornaments of the small grass-covered court-yard. A pathway, trodden from the fence to the front door, proved, however, that the house was not entirely abandoned. Some large apple-trees stretched their branches over the neighboring wall as far as the middle of the court-yard,

and the stream crossed it, hardly kept within its bounds by a sort of stone gutter.

"Heavens! how pretty it is!" exclaimed Marie.

Charles took off his hat to the little house.

"I salute thee!" said he to it; "thou art an honest dwelling-place—so honest that Faust would not have dared to come and seek Marguerite here. Honest people built thee, loved thee, and were born and died under thy humble thatched roof! Thou art the abode of my dreams, oh! small house, whoever your proprietor may be!"

"To whom does this treasure belong?" asked Marie.

Philomène drew out an old worn key from under her skirts; she had two enormous and mysterious pockets—two abysses—from whence came forth, according to circumstances, things the most unlikely to meet therein.

"It was my grandfather's father who built it," said she, as she fastened the rails securely. "You know, Marie, that your mother was a Miss Hensey, and that it is thus we are related."

"Then," murmured Marie, "this must be the first home of my family."

Charles approached his wife, and took her by the hand. These two, who, though worldly and Parisians to the marrow of their bones, did not disdain their humble origin. Verroy, though not born of a fisherman, but of a provincial notary, esteemed his wife of equally good origin as himself. Philomène had opened the door and preceded them. He kept Marie's hand in his, and

they passed together over the threshold of the family home. '

The low room was lit by a window with small lozenge-shaped panes set in lead. An old-fashioned bedstead, closed on three sides, was built in to the end of the room; and in a partition of the bed, an opening exposed to view a very small crossbarred window, that looked out on the back of the house; an ivy plant that ornamented the outside of the wall curtained it with its branches and foliage, and gave it the appearance of a church window. The curtains, of dark blue linen edged with fringe made of red and blue balls, dated probably from the foundation of the house. A chestnut-wood cupboard fastened in the wall; in the embrasure of the window, that was wainscoted to the ceiling, was a bench that made a refuge, square-shaped, as it approached the chimney-place; a table of the same wood, heavy and immovable, composed the rustic furniture of this dwelling, which is like a thousand others in that country.

"It was there," said Philomène, pointing to the bed, "that our grandfather was born, Marie."

"And where he died?" asked the young woman, in a low voice.

"No; there," said Madame Crépin, showing the corner of the chimney-place.

Silence reigned for a moment in the low room. The young people became very serious, and still holding each other's hands, felt a world of thoughts stir their brains. Philomène opened the cupboard.

"The horrid beasts!" cried she. "They have gnawed the last wooden spoon! Fortunately, here is one in the mouse-trap."

Verroy and his wife started at her discordant voice. Silence, hardly disturbed by a word whispered in the ear, seemed to them scarcely respectful enough for this family asylum; but Philomène went to and fro, moving everything, and making great floods of dust fly, that, because it was venerable, choked one's throat none the less.

"To whom does this house belong?" asked Charles, for the second time.

"Why, to me!" answered Madame Crépin, without stopping. "Where can the large arm-chair be? Ah! I have taken it up-stairs! There is not anything to sit down on here."

She slowly ascended the stairway, and soon returned, dragging after her, without any ceremony, an old straw arm-chair. The form and mouldings were in pure Louis XV. style. The straw had been changed very often; but the last time it had been done was at least forty years ago, and it had become the color of new bronze.

"Where does that chair come from?" asked Verroy.

"It is the one that was at the corner of the fire in the chimney-place. It was on this that they found grandfather dead, one June evening when they returned from harvesting. They took him his bowl of soup, and found he was cold. You cannot remember that, Marie; you were too young. I do not even know whether you were born!"

Whilst talking, Philomène made the arm-chair turn

round on one of its back legs, and administered it a volley of strokes with her apron with the design of dusting it. The young people, without saying a word, sat down on the chestnut-wood bench, where Marie's mother had climbed when she was very small, holding on to the table so as not to fall.

"There!" said Madame Crépin, when she had finished her dusting, "sit down!"

Raising her eyes, she saw that her guests had not waited to do so, and then she sat down herself, without any ceremony, in the grandfather's arm-chair.

"It is horrid here," said she, "it is dirty; one cannot drive the mice away, but I come here from time to time, to air it a little. I profited by your being here to do so, since you love old things so much."

"Philomène," said Marie, hardly raising her voice, "sell me this house."

A light, blue as steel, traversed the widow's eyes; she had found a new vein in the mine of life; she smiled and showed her teeth—which was a very imprudent thing to do, in any case.

"You don't dream of such a thing!" she answered. "What could one do with such a hovel?"

"For love of the family," replied Madame Verroy.

"But it is in the family, my dear!"

"I beg you to do so, Philomène," the young woman insisted.

"Cousin, it would give us so much pleasure!" added her husband.

"Come, now, my dear friends, this is a joke! I have determined not to part with it."

"Then, let us this house; we were looking for something to hire. This is what we want; we will have some furniture brought."

"Hire it to you? certainly not; but if it pleases you, you can live here as long as you like. I am enchanted to be able to be agreeable to you."

"But, Philomène," Marie insisted, "you are not rich: allow us to pay you the rent of this house; it is worth something."

"It is insignificant; I would prefer to give it to you, and give it most willingly. When will you come here?"

"Why," said Marie, looking at Charles, "we had the intention of passing the summer somewhere near Granville; we would be better off here; nothing hinders us from installing ourselves here at once—that is to say, next week—"

"To-morrow, if you choose! or rather, no! You promised me a week and I will not give you grace of an hour; but on Thursday you will be free to come and catch the mice and drive away the spiders as much as your heart desires."

After having expressed their gratitude, the young people visited the house. A cellar was opposite to the room they were in, and on the first floor two bed-rooms, separated by a small cabinet, reproduced the same arrangement.

"It is Paradise!" declared Charles, when the inspection was over; "we will spend a delightful summer here, and I am going to work like a steam-engine!"

"How can one like an ugly hut like that!" exclaimed Philomène, putting the key in her pocket, while they crossed the court-yard on their way out. "A sad, isolated, dirty place— Stop, look at the weeds! They grow everywhere! Ah! you will have a great deal to do to clean it up!"

"But, cousin, we will not clean it up!"

"As you like! all the same, you have a strange taste!"

"Our cousin is not poetical," observed Marie, in a low voice, while Philomène stopped to close the gate.

"Nor has she the bump of family veneration. She is an odd woman! Say, Marie, how happy we are going to be there!"

The young woman clasped his arm without replying, and they set forth on the road to Diélette.

CHAPTER VII.

COFFEE AND CONVERSATION.

IT was a pretty house in truth, and the young people were soon installed in it. The upper rooms were clean and gay; a few *mètres* of light cretonne made in less than a week a comfortable abode of its hospitable walls.

Madame Crépin, who was brisk and merry, went and came unceasingly on the road with a basket on her arm. She had procured a servant, found furniture, furnished linen—and in exchange for so many kind services could Monsieur and Madame Verroy do otherwise than ask her to dinner? She brought a half-dozen eggs and passed the day at La Heuserie. What was more natural?

She presented her cousins to her neighbors and friends in the place; besides, every one was very curious to see a celebrated man! They found everywhere the most cordial welcome, according to the kind custom of the country, where hospitality and benevolence shown towards strangers are so natural, that they do not even consider them as virtues. One house alone showed a frowning face—Lavenel's.

The grain merchant had not witnessed without distrust the intrusion of this new element in Philomène's life. At first, he, Lavenel, wished nothing to do with those people; what had they come to find in that country? Was there not room enough elsewhere under the sun, that they had to

come to disturb his plans? However, he could not turn his back upon them, and he endeavored to give his face a less sullen expression when he saw that, without doubt, the Verroys had the intention of passing the summer by his native waters.

Madame Lavenel, who was more wary, had not failed to reprimand her son from the beginning about his conduct, and she presented her homages to Marie Verroy with the best grace in the world. She invited her to eat fruit in her garden, picked a basketful which she put on her arm as she was leaving; and as she was obliged to return the basket on her next visit, she then offered the young woman coffee.

Between nien, to offer coffee means to swallow one's self, and to make one's guests swallow a considerable quantity of small glasses of brandy; among women the thing is of less consequence, sugar plays a greater rôle in it, and a little glass of *liqueur* replaces the libations of those gentlemen, not, however, without the coffee having received its traditional addition of alcohol, but only in the cup. Madame Lavenel did not disdain "*a tear*" in her coffee, and was much astonished to see Marie refuse the decanter; she had hoped that the gentle warmth of the beverage, added to the expansion of conversation, would permit her to question her perspective daughter-in-law's cousin. A little disappointed, she did not abandon her resolution however, but confined herself to attacking things from a greater distance.

Philomène did not assist at this little feast; Madame

Lavenel had taken the precaution to choose a day when she would be obliged to absent herself to go to the market at Picux. So it was not necessary for the good dame to watch out of the window, to assure herself that their conversation would not be intruded upon.

After the indispensable preliminaries, such as a visit to the garden, the making of a bouquet, and divers compliments and kindnesses, the two ladies went towards the low room adjoining the shop; and there, to Madame Verroy's great surprise, who much desired to leave, "the cover was laid." She had to sit and take some coffee, that had been made in anticipation by Madame Lavenel's vigilant hands, and which had not improved by passing two hours set in a bowl of hot water. Marie Verroy performed her duty, however, and showed the best grace possible, while boring herself for a half-hour and more. She was not a little astonished to hear her amiable hostess question her cautiously about her childhood, her relations of friendship and parentage with Philomène and her family—in a word, to make her undergo a complete examination. The questions followed each other in a certain chronological order, which enabled Marie, who was, by the way, very shrewd and very sensible, to understand Madame Lavenel's designs.

She permitted herself, therefore, to be questioned, replying the exact truth to all her interrogations, but never anything more. At the end of a few moments, Madame Lavenel perceived that she had to do with a very strong party, and, from that moment, she had recourse to the

supreme resource of cunning people: she spoke quite frankly.

"You doubtless know, my dear lady," said she to her, "that I would not have taken the liberty of speaking to you about your family, if I had not been moved by feelings stronger than myself." (Here she heaved a sigh.) "The desire of my heart—I can surely tell it to you—has always been to have Madame Crépin for my daughter-in-law. My poor boy has always loved her, has never loved any one but herself, and I would have liked, before my death, to see my son settled as he wished. Ah! it is very cruel for a mother to depart from this world leaving her children all alone, isolated and without friendship!"

The good dame's heart seemed to swell with bitterness; Marie Verroy felt obliged to say some kind words to her.

"You are still young, Madame Lavenel; you have plenty of time to think about all that."

"No; you see, my dear lady, one does not know who will live, or who will die! I should have liked to have seen my son married. And since he wishes no one else but Philomène, when she became a widow, and he made his desire known to me, I said to him: 'Well, my boy! if it is Philomène you want, you must take her!'"

"That was very wise on your part," said Marie.

"Yes, my dear lady, it was a sacrifice; because, Philomène, you see, is not as young nor as rich as might be the woman to whom my son could aspire; but I am willing to accept everything so as to see him happy!"

Marie thought that to call her daughter-in-law old and

poor was not a very amiable way in which to accept her. But one must take people as they are, and she never breathed a word.

"There is an obstacle," Madame Lavenel said at last, seeing her visitor would not come to her aid.

"What is it?"

"Philomène does not wish to marry again!"

"It is very unfortunate that your son should have set his choice exactly on a woman who does not wish to marry again," said Marie, endeavoring to assume a commiserating look that did not come of itself.

"Oh! yes! as to that, yes. But I have thought in my small mind, for I am only a poor ignorant woman, Madame Verroy—not like yourself, who know so many things—I have thought, that if Philomène were well advised, she might perhaps change her mind."

"Do you think so?" asked Marie, in a very dubitative tone.

"I am sure of it. That poor Philomène loves her family too much! It is through the excess of her good heart. She told me the other day that if she married again, it would be very horrid on her part, for she would thus deprive of their inheritance those of her family who had a right to it."

"Upon my word!" exclaimed Madame Verroy; "that is a very extraordinary idea."

"It is as I tell you," said Madame Lavenel, who really did not lie, for two days before she had held this strange conversation with her.

"What madness! It is worse than Don Quixote!" the young woman could not help saying, laughingly. "And who, then, may these heirs be for whom Madame Crépin wishes to make a vow of eternal widowhood?"

"But—I spoke to you just now of your family—I do not see any one else but yourself!"

"I!" exclaimed Madame Verroy, with so much vivacity that she nearly upset her coffee. "I? Why she is hardly ten years older than I am!"

"She says she is ill, that she is sure not to live long, and she does not wish to despoil you of what is coming to you."

"But, Madame Lavenel," exclaimed Marie, a little nervous at seeing this delicate question agitated with so little ceremony, "there are other relations besides myself, I am sure! And, then, there is her husband's family! And after all, one is quite free to give one's fortune to whom one likes!"

"It is yourself to whom she wishes to give it!"

"I do not want it!" said Marie, energetically. "You can tell her I do not want it! It is dreadful to think a woman so near my own age should think of making me her heir. No, I do not wish to hear it spoken of!"

"You will not prevent her doing it, if it is her idea!" insisted Madame Lavenel.

"She would do a great deal better to marry again," continued Marie, following her thought. "She thinks of a proximate death because she is lonely and sad, but in the bosom of a new home she would soon forget her funeral thoughts."

"Ah! yes!" said Madame Lavenel, enchanted to see her bait had taken; "you should tell her so! But do not mention me, you understand! She forbade me whispering a word to you about it; she would be angry, and that would not advance my son's affairs."

"That is very true! I will advise marriage in general to her!"

Madame Lavenel remained silent a moment.

"The first comer is not what Philomène wishes. Without being reprehensible in anything, she has her little fancies, and her temper is not always good. What would suit her would be a man not too young, for she is thirty-eight years old; steady, good, not liking drink—in a word, an honest man."

"Take my bear!" thought Marie. She added out loud: "Like your son, is it not so, Madame Lavenel? Every one preaches up his own saint, and if Monsieur Lavenel has loved Philomène since so long a time, he knows the defects she may have, and he is determined to pass over them!"

"How well you talk!" said Madame Lavenel, full of admiration. "One sees very well that you have read books; as for me, I am only a poor, good, countrywoman, and I do not know how to say what I think, but I know very well that you are an honest lady, and very nice for all that!"

The two women separated, and Madame Lavenel, as she was arranging her coffee-cups, said to herself she had not lost her day.

CHAPTER VIII.

MARIE'S INVITATION.

WHEN Charles Verroy heard of Madame Crépin's intentions, he was at first in a very bad humòr.

"I am sure," said he, to his wife, "that that great simpleton of a Philomène told her of it, expressly that it might be repeated to us!"

"Oh! my dear, can you think it—"

"I am sure of it! The intention may be good on her part, but one does not tell of such things; one *does* them! It shows a want of tact that I did not think her capable of."

A little saddened, for she really loved her cousin, the young woman determined to take Philomène aside, and give her some good advice necessitated by her lonely position.

"Why do you not marry again?" she said to her one afternoon, while Charles, stretched out on a mat, was trying to read his journal by the last gleams of daylight. They were beyond hearing distance, and descended the road that led to the sea.

"After all I have suffered!" replied Philomène; "my poor husband was so good, so affectionate, that I shall never find another like him!"

"You might not find his like," said Marie, "but you

could find another who did not resemble him at all, but whom you could love just the same. Life is so long when one is all alone!"

Philomène put on a sad face, which gave her a still more morose appearance than ordinarily.

"Yes, life is long! If only my husband's family was nice to me. But I have no one on whom I can count, no one who will even render me a service in case of need!"

"We are here!" said Marie, gently.

"Yes, you! so I love no one but you! When one thinks that since my husband's death, no one of his family has entered my doors! They look upon me as dead, I presume."

"However, did they not show you some favors in regard to the inheritance?"

"This much, that the Captain had some debts, and I paid them," replied Philomène, sourly. "If, after that, they left me the recovery of the credits, it was only just."

"Without doubt, without doubt! And they have not been nice to you?"

Philomène began a long litany of complaints against her mother-in-law, her brother-in-law, her three sisters-in-law, their uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, etc., etc. All of them had always disgraced and detested her; all wished her evil, and she returned it to them—well, not in wishing them evil, for, thank God, she had never wished that to anybody—but she did not love them at all, and would never seek to do them pleasure, for it would be only losing her trouble.

When she had finished, and stopped to catch her breath, Marie answered her, quietly:

"Why do you not marry? That would be the best way to punish them for their bad acts."

"So they will not have my inheritance? Be easy; they will not have it. They turn around it, but they will be nicely caught! It is not much, and a poor widow has a great deal of trouble to live on it, but the little there is will pass under their noses!"

Marie kept silence. An idea that had already come to her ran in her brain.

"Why do you not put your fortune in a life-interest?" said she to her; "that would make you sure of leaving nothing to any one, and would permit you to live more at your ease."

Philomène did not answer.

"If you wished to marry again," continued the young woman, "that would be another thing; one is very glad to leave something to one's children; but, since you are resolved to remain a widow—"

"No," said Madame Crépin, brusquely; "I do not want to rid myself of my fortune. Do you wish me to tell you something? It is yourself who will have it!"

Marie shook her head.

"You are too young," said she, "to think of that. Do not speak of it again, I beg of you!"

"You shall have it," insisted Philomène. "You are the only one who has shown me any affection; you and your husband have alone thought of coming to see me in my

solitude. You have not disdained my poverty; it is just that you should be rewarded."

She threw herself on Madame Verroy's neck, weeping, and clasped her for a long while on her heart. Marie, touched by her sadness, consoled her as best she knew how, and with kind words succeeded in stopping her effusion and her tears.

"I am nervous," Madame Crépin said, at last, when she had recovered herself a little. "It is the retired life I lead: never any pleasures, never any distractions, it is not very astonishing that I should be easily overcome. Ah! my good Marie! how happy you are! You live amid pleasures, you have a thousand resources of which I have not even an idea."

"Come and see us at Paris," said Marie. "Come and pass two weeks with us. We have an apartment larger than is necessary. You will not disturb us in any way. Leave here with us in the first days of autumn?"

"You do not think of such a thing! I am not rich enough to give myself such costly fancies!"

"The journey is not such a great affair," remarked Madame Verroy.

"Not for you; but for me it is a very great expense. You cannot imagine the little I possess!"

"Well," said Marie, grown a little impatient, "you will make the voyage at my expense. You would not accept anything for the rent of your house. I have certainly the right to offer you this much."

"You are too good, my dear friend. I thank you, and—"

"You accept?"

"I refuse."

"Go away, then!" exclaimed Marie. "And don't come to talk to me about your want of distractions and your loneliness, for I will pity you no more."

Philomène took up the thread of her discourse—she always had a bobbin of it ready—and her lamentations lasted until when Charles, not being able to see any more, came to join them.

"I have invited her to come and see us at Paris," said his wife to him, seeing him approach.

"You did well."

"But she does not wish to do so."

"She is wrong," the young man answered phlegmatically. "You refuse, I fancy, cousin, that we may urge you more warmly."

Philomène was rather afraid of her cousin, whose calmness and reserved prudence embarrassed her, not knowing what was underneath it. She laughed, and showed her yellow teeth.

"I assure you, cousin, it is not to make myself urged," said she.

"Then you will come—it is only a question of time."

Madame Crépin took leave of the young people, and returned to her home, asking herself whether Monsieur Verron, Parisian as he was, would not be cleverer than herself, Philomène Crépin.

CHAPTER IX.

VIRGINIE AND HER WEDDING STOCKINGS.

IT began to rain. Every one knows that in Normandy the rain is one's worst enemy. Everywhere else one can manage to support it, and a few days of rain does not give the blues; but, in this happy country, the merits of the land turn into faults—the pretty valleys, shadowed by beautiful trees, and carpeted with verdure, become, according to their greater or less declivity, either sloughs or torrents, and the elevated places, from whence the landscape is set forth in so much variety, are veritable pallories, whence the unwary pedestrian receives from all sides the disagreeable effects of a fierce drizzle, that penetrates under his most inmost garments and congeals his blood in his veins. After three or four days of this rule, the walls leak, the roofs weep into the gables, and melancholy possesses itself of the prey that the bad weather has prepared for it.

It had rained for a week, and Charles began to grow nervous. His wife endeavored to distract him with every fancy of her original and mercurial spirit; but all her good will found itself powerless against the invading sadness of gray days and dark nights, when the noise of drops of rain hurrying one after the other, was unceasingly heard.

“Suppose we invite some one to come and take part in

our misery?" said Marie one evening, when Charles was yawning enough to make himself nauseated.

"Take part in it! paddle in it, do you mean? What mortal could there be, audacious enough to risk his life in crossing the oceans of mud that separate us from human species?"

"I don't know. Have we not some friend taking his holiday, who would be willing to alleviate our dulness?"

"They are all sportsmen," answered Charles, yawning dreadfully. "In three months we could have more of them than we would wish; but for the present—"

Another yawn cut his speech short. Marie, caught by the infection, followed his example, and when they had finished, their eyes full of involuntary tears, they looked at each other, and burst out laughing.

"This is well!" said Charles, wiping his eyes; "in truth, it is time to resort to friendship; especially as very probably, when friendship will have received our letter, it will have stopped raining, and we shall have a little fine weather. Who must we immolate?"

The young people passed in review their friends, of all ages and conditions, and chose two or three amongst them, to whom they sent a copy of the same letter, under the form of the most despairing appeal.

While they were awaiting their answers, a letter reached them from Paris. It had travelled for a week, and had followed them in all their stopping-places so faithfully, that the envelope, which was all spotted with postmarks, and covered with addresses on every side, barely held

white space enough on which to write the name of their present abode.

"One move more," said Charles, "and we should never have received it. I cannot even recognize the handwriting of the first address."

Philomène, who happened to be there, began to blow the fire in the great chimney-place, as if to take the protecting gods of the hearth as witness that she did not feel the slightest curiosity, during which time Charles opened the envelope and read its contents.

"Ah!" cried he, with the happy air of a man who sees his release dawn. "Ah! Marie, here is a real friend! It is from Masson, who asks where we are; he has obtained a month's leave of absence, and wishes to pass it with us."

"What a pity!" said Marie, as she read over the letter. "Here is already a week lost!"

"Let us write at once, at once," sang Charles, running toward the table; "or, better, how can one send a despatch from here, cousin?"

So as to prove well that she was not listening, Philomène made him repeat the question.

"It was not easy to send a despatch; one had to walk a half-dozen *kilomètres* on foot, and as many returning; the post was better. And were they then in such a hurry to see their friend that they were afraid of losing one day?"

"There's Philomène becoming jealous," cried Marie, laughing.

"Well, yes, I am jealous!" Philomène acknowledged, with the most touching expression. "After years of solitude and abandonment, I have found some friends, and they wish to take them from me! I don't love your Monsieur Masson at all—is it Masson you call him?"

"You will love him better when you know him, for he is the best fellow in the world! And then, don't trouble us with your jealousy! Shall we not love you as much when he is here? We have known him since a long while, and that has not prevented our loving you, simpleton!"

Philomène thanked her cousin for this unaffected speech by a look full of gratitude, and Charles composed a letter, in which the explanations on the means to be employed for reaching La Heuserie took up no less than two entire pages; after which they awaited his coming.

Madame Crépin was thoughtful and preoccupied, and during the dinner, which took place at twelve o'clock, according to the custom of the place, she ate little, and crumbled up a great deal of bread on the table by the side of her plate, where she soon had a little heap of crumbs, not—it must be confessed—of immaculate whiteness.

"What is the matter with you? You eat nothing!" observed her cousin, when they had reached the dessert.

"I do not like cream," answered Philomène; "it does not agree with me."

"But there have been other things besides cream, and you have eaten nothing!"

Philomène smiled with a heart-breaking smile.

"What would you?" said she. "When I think over my sorrows, it takes my appetite entirely away."

Charles, who had unfolded his journal while awaiting his coffee, whistled in a little, low, modulated manner that was extremely harmonious. His wife gave him a reproachful look, that was quite thrown away, for he continued his little tune in the most innocent fashion.

"Why," said Marie, kindly, "think any more of those disagreeable things, that are passed and finished long ago? You must only think of the future."

After a short silence, she added :

"What has become of the Lavenels?"

Another silence ensued. Madame Crépin seemed in no hurry to reply. Charles' presence and music annoyed her, evidently; Madame Verroy understood it, and hastened to fill the cups with the hot and aromatic coffee.

"Well, cousin," said Verroy, "those good Lavenels?"

"They are very well, cousin, I thank you, for them."

The coffee partaken of, Marie led Philomène off to her room.

"Tell me, cousin," said she to her, "is there anything the matter?"

"Lavenel annoys me," replied the questioned cousin in a cross tone.

"Has he spoken to you again of his intentions?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Last evening."

"Well?"

"Well, he annoys me!"

"And did you tell him so?"

"Certainly."

"What did he answer?"

"That it was indifferent to him and that he wanted me all the same!"

"There is a gentleman who keeps to his intentions," replied Marie, who could not prevent herself from laughing. "He will have a patent for fidelity at the next Congress, never doubt it! So, then, the affair is still pending?"

Philomène grumbled a sort of acquiescence.

"What displeased me," said she, "was that he tried to kiss me, and I did not like it; and I told him so. I don't think he will try it again."

"You understand how to repel your lovers," said Marie, as she was leaving the room. "You will end in marrying him, my good friend; one does not escape one's destiny!"

"Marry him! a grain merchant! I, who detest trade! Ah! you do not know my character!" said the widow, bitterly.

"As you will," the young woman hastened to say; "only don't eat me up!"

They talked of other things, and the day ended without any accident. The next day in the afternoon, the weather having cleared a little, Marie proposed to Verroy that they should return Philomène's visit, who had not been there since. Some different small purchases to be made

determined them to improve the first calm day, and they started forth through the yet undried paths, a little basket in their hands, as delighted at their freak as schoolboys in holiday time.

As they came out on the road, they perceived Lavenel coming towards them. The latter did not see them, and as he was walking he addressed the most vehement apostrophes to the problematical sun, the absent stars, and doubtless the angels charged with watching over him, manifested by passionate gestures of his head and arms. A triumphant smile lighted up his countenance, and he addressed to himself, in a modulated, suave voice, compliments that our friends could not hear, but which, to judge from the expression of his face, had nothing discouraging in them.

"He is mad!" said Marie, holding herself a little closer to her husband.

"I should think rather that he is drunk; but he walks straightly, and if his brain is impaired, his legs are solid."

Lavenel, who was now only ten paces from them, perceived them, and trembled like a man awakened suddenly from a dream, drew his hat on his head more firmly, and composed his face. As they passed each other, he addressed them a good-morning in a loud voice, and with a smile in which shone all the joy of success, went on without stopping.

"What a strange face he wears to-day!" said Marie; "at any rate, he has the air of being satisfied with his fate."

"I would stake much," said Charles, "that he has inherited something—"

"Or that Philomène has accepted him," interrupted his wife, hastily.

They took a hundred steps more, and before them, crossing the sands, in a turning of the road which permitted them to see at some distance, they perceived Philomène coming, with a basket on her arm, her head in advance, walking with a brisk step, and who was, after her fashion, another incarnation of joy.

"It is singular," said Marie. "Look, Charles, what an enchanted air she has!"

Madame Crépin presented her profile, which did not enhance her looks, and a full smile played around her large mouth; with her forehead advancing, carried a little low down, as was her wont, she looked as though she wished to batter in the door of life. She, too, was talking to herself in a low voice, and the triumph of a malignant smile illuminated her yellow face, from time to time, with a singular light.

"*Mephisto!*" said Charles, in a very low voice. "Let us sit down here, Marie; here is a protecting bush, that will enable us to hear the mysterious conversation she is holding with herself."

Before his wife had had time to protest, he let himself fall on the ground, and, drawing Marie by her skirts, he obliged her to do the same.

"Yes, yes; that will make them all enraged, you can count on it! the lovely owl!"

Suddenly she perceived the couple sitting on the very damp turf, and stopped short, as though one had drawn hard on her rein.

"What are you doing there?" said she, brusquely, and not too politely.

"We were going to see you, and as you were coming towards us we stopped here to wait," replied Charles in the same tone and with the same manner.

Philomène changed her manner immediately.

"You will catch cold," said she, sweetly; "the grass is wet. Come to my house, since you were on your way there."

The three pedestrians regained the road leading towards Diélette.

"We have just met Lavenel," said Charles, incapable of restraining his maliciousness. "Does he own any property about here?"

"No," said Philomène, anxiously. "Why?"

"Because he had the look of a proprietor who has just acquired something."

"He, perhaps, wishes to buy," replied the widow; and her face darkened.

"Is this yours, Philomène—this corner of land that reaches from La Heuserie to the sea?"

"Yes, cousin."

This response issued with so much difficulty from Madame Crépin's throat, that Marie shook Charles' arm slightly, to warn him not to continue, and he kept silence; while his eyes, beaming with maliciousness,

examined the widow with the satisfaction of a collector who has found a handsome medal.

The conversation languished; a short visit at Philomène's house did not revive it, and after a few minutes the husband and wife left to make their purchases.

They had hardly crossed the threshold of the door when Madame Aubier appeared on hers, with a cap trimmed with ruffles, her white foulard neck-handkerchief, and her large blooming face. Although it was mentioned in no guide-book whatever, the spectacle of this good, smiling humor was certainly the most rejoicing thing that Diélette offered to tourists' eyes. Charles and his wife could not help contemplating it with a smile, and Madame Aubier took two steps towards them.

"Come in," said she to them; "come in! I have not seen you for two weeks."

"It is not our fault, Madame Aubier, but that of the rain!" replied Charles, accepting the invitation. "Your country is lovely, but the roads are very bad."

"One cannot have everything," the good lady replied, philosophically, as she introduced them into her small parlor, furnished in old-fashioned style, and full of flowers. Near the window was a very pretty young girl, about twenty years of age, knitting, with needles as fine as a hair, a small stocking with Scotch thread, whose net-work resembled a spider's-web.

"And there is my goddaughter, Virginie, who is knitting her wedding stockings," said Madame Aubier, as she offered them chairs.

"Oh, aunt!" said Virginie, blushing and smiling; and a hundred times more pretty in her sweet confusion.

"Is Mademoiselle going to be married?" asked Charles, with his habitual pleasant grace.

"Why, no! Monsieur, my godmother is joking," replied the young girl, continuing to smile and blush in the most charming, natural way.

"She will marry some time or other, Monsieur Verroy; and in the shortest time possible, never doubt! These young girls are always in such a hurry to put on the yoke of misery!"

Virginie understood joking well; half a peasant, half a young lady, she possessed the charms of a village maiden, and the grace of a citadine, so she immediately won Monsieur and Madame Verroy's heart. The good lady, enchanted at her goddaughter's success with such intelligent and illustrious persons, could not contain herself for joy, and, in the overflowing of her excellent heart, knew not what to offer them; they were obliged to stop her, or else she would have had all the contents of her cellar brought up, and all her provisions in the garret brought down.

"Whom have you seen to-day?" asked she, when her effervescence was a little calmed—thanks to the consumption of a few biscuits and a finger's depth of wine.

"Nobody much; only Philomène!"

"And Lavenel," added Charles. "Lavenel, whom we met gesticulating like a Chappe telegraph, and prophesying like Ezekiel."

"Lavenel? Where?" asked Madame Aubier, cagerly.
"On the road to our house."

The good dame's visage became as round as a full moon, and all her stout person seemed to dissolve in a little, mute, infectious laugh.

"Virginie," said she afterwards, "go and get us some pears, on the second shelf to the left; they are last year's pears—a wonderful preservation; you will tell me how good they are!"

"Madame Aubier, I protest!" exclaimed Charles. "It is not permitted to make people eat like this—and at mid-day, too!"

Madame Aubier winked her eye.

"Go, my little Virginie," said she. The young girl went out, and immediately Madame Aubier leaned confidentially towards her visitors.

"You met Lavenel?"

"Yes, Madame; and he was revolving his arms like a windmill—enough to dislodge all the stars in the firmament."

"And, later, Philomène?"

"Yes."

"How did she look?"

"She was laughing all by herself, and had the look of a cat who has just caught a mouse."

"Oh, Charles!" said Marie.

"Yes, my dear friend—but not to eat it!"

"Well!" said Madame Aubier, approaching the pair, "I am going to tell you a piece of news. Philomène

dined lately at Madame Lavenel's, and they eat a goose!"

"It was cannibalism—" Charles began; but he restrained himself.

"A goose at this season?" asked Marie.

"Oh! it was an extraordinary goose—a miraculous goose! It was the only one that survived an autumn brood. They despaired of bringing it up, and then, since Easter, it began to grow fat; it became magnificent. They exhibited it as a curiosity."

"And Madame Lavenel decided to sacrifice that extraordinary animal?" asked Charles, with a very serious air.

"Yes, Monsieur; but in the greatest mystery! For fear that the neighbors should know it, Madame Lavenel plucked the goose in her garden behind her house, where she could be seen from no side. But—" Here the good dame was taken with a fit of laughter that made her double chin tremble. "Our gardens join; the wind arose and blew away the feathers, and all Diélette found itself covered with them! Think of the general astonishment! Goose feathers in mid June! It could only be Madame Lavenel's unique goose. No one doubted it any more, when they saw Philomène enter the dear lady's house about mid-day, and stay there."

"Whence we must conclude—" asked Charles, whom all these small gossipings infinitely amused.

"That the goose has not been vainly sacrificed, and that we shall soon hear Lavenel's and your cousin's betrothal

announced. But above all, don't go and speak to her about it."

"Never fear, Madame Aubier: we are as discreet as two tombs. Moreover, your information agrees too well with my own observations for me not to give it entire faith. Now we must not speak of the marriage—"

Virginie returned at that moment with a plate full of venerable fruit, wrinkled like russet apples, and they talked no more about marriage.

"Are you going to stay long amongst us, Mademoiselle?" Charles asked the young girl, who was contemplating, with a sort of respect, "one of the glories of France," as the articles of his friends said.

"I do not know, Monsieur," replied Virginie. "My godmother had the kindness to ask me to come and stay with her for a few days—"

"You will stay as long as you like, darling," her godmother interrupted. "It is a great joy for our house to have a pretty young girl to enliven it a little! Try and wish not to go away too soon!"

"Don't be worried, godmother; I am very much pleased here!"

The young girl approached the good lady, and laid her hand on her shoulder with a gesture of infantine and familiar tenderness, quite in harmony with the persons and the place; so much so that Charles and his wife exchanged a look of approbation.

"I would like to marry her here, so that she would never leave," continued Madame Aubier, addressing

herself to the young people. "It is true her husband would take her away from me; but I should have the resource of going to see her during the hours in the day when I am alone. A house without children is a sad one—especially when it has been full of them and none remain."

The excellent woman's sigh found an echo in Marie's heart. She, too, had lost children, and knew what it costs one. Virginie's hand reposed more caressingly on her godmother's shoulder, and her look, full of kindness, sought Madame Verroy's eyes, to show her the expression of her sympathy.

"She is charming—perfectly charming," thought the young woman, answering the look.

"Do you hope to marry her, Madame Aubier?" said she, out loud. "What man would deserve so good a child?"

"Ah! I don't know! don't talk to me about it! I am not her mother—she has lost hers, the poor little one—and yet I feel a real mother-in-law's sentiments in regard to the one who will take her from me! She has some fortune—not much, but enough, about eighteen hundred francs income—her father troubles himself no more about her than about the old moons of last year; if an honest fellow should be found, and she should be willing to marry him, he would do well to carry her away, for I should tear out his eyes."

"And if he made her unhappy, what would you do?" asked Charles, smiling.

"Then, oh! then, I would do to him—*ma foi!* I know not what! One is very much to be pitied when they are obliged to have sons-in-law in this life—at least, so my father said when I married!"

The good creature smiled and her eyes were moist. Virginie put her two hands on Madame Aubier's round, fat shoulders, as though she were going to embrace her, but she did not dare to show so much demonstration before strangers, and this mute clasp was all her timidity would allow; she returned to the window and took her knitting.

After a few minutes, Monsieur and Madame Verroy withdrew, and the first word they exchanged was in admiration of Virginie's charm.

"She reinstates the name! That is saying everything," concluded Charles. "For thirty years it has only been worn by cooks!"

CHAPTER X.

KEEPING SECRETS.

TWO days passed without Philomène's being seen at La Meuserie, and this infraction of a habit she had contracted of taking all her meals there, did not fail to surprise our young people. •

"She is perhaps eating the remains of the goose!" said Charles; but this purely material explanation did not satisfy his wife. However, in want of enlightenment, she confined herself to conjectures, which were far better founded than she even believed. •

In effect, the goose had presided at a repast worthy of the sacrificial feasts, where the augurs eat the flesh of prophetic victims. Lavenel had at last obtained from Philomène the promise that she would consecrate to him the remainder of her days.

What motive decided the widow to accept the admirer who had so many times been rejected? A motive of an extreme simplicity: Philomène had only a very vague intention of keeping her promise, so vague in truth, that it was not even the ghost of an intention; it was rather quite the contrary. •

But for the moment she wished Lavenel to leave her in peace; with her Parisian relations, in the intimacy in which she lived with very civilized people, it hurt her

self-love that she should be openly sought after by the grain merchant. This latter—steel against steel—had lately invented a new means for obtaining his end: he had informed all Diélette of his intentions in regard to the widow, so much so that she could not take a step without hearing her admirer spoken of.

“Ah! well, that poor Lavenel, will you keep him sighing always?” said the gossips; “he neither cats nor drinks!”

This persecution of a new kind had irritated Philomène exceedingly, but it was not in her nature even to act openly; and she had accepted Lavenel with the intention of changing her mind as soon as Monsieur and Madame Verroy should leave La Heuserie. The voyage which she intended to make to Paris at the young couple's expense would serve as a reason for her change of humor.

This Machiavelian combination ought surely to succeed; but one always forgets something, and it is that something that throws the train off the track. Lavenel, who only half trusted his lovely future wife's word, continued the system that seemed to have succeeded so well for him, and, under the seal of the most profound secrecy, his mother and himself informed two or three of the glibest tongues in the place, that Madame Crépin would shortly change her name for that of Madame Lavenel. One part of the secret, however, was well kept: it had been agreed that they would say nothing about it to the people of La Heuserie, and everybody was of one mind about keeping silence.

“They have asked her to leave them her property, you

see," said Lavenel in confidence, "and if they learn she is going to marry again, they would very likely do something unpleasant to her. They are not at all accommodating, those Parisians; for a 'yes,' or a 'no,' they will summon persons before the Justice of Peace!"

The Justice of Peace is what every good Norman fears the most after God, and sometimes before Him, for no one knows what his neighbor may say truly or falsely, and differences which are to be settled are arranged at a loss rather than to appear before the magistrate. Lavenel was thus certain of obtaining silence from his confidants through this dreaded name, and, in effect, no one had any desire to speak about Philomène to the "people of La Heuserie."

Madame Crépin had made of the silence to be kept in regard to her relations a condition *sine qua non* of her consent. An old Polish custom consists in introducing a case of nullity in every marriage contract, thus correcting what might be redoubtable and inconvenient in eternal bonds. Philomène, who, however, completely ignored everything in relation to Poland, had found an analogous resource in her natural character. It was very little probable that Monsieur and Madame Verroy would not hear her proposed marriage spoken of, and as soon as they were informed of it, the moment would come for her to disengage herself from Lavenel of a hazardous promise!

She reserved to herself, besides, the right to maintain to and against every one, that she had never promised anything, and that her pretended consent was an audacious lie of Lavenel's and his mother. There had been no witnesses

to her promise, and without witnesses one cannot furnish a proof; every one is aware of this.

And who knew? She might, perhaps, marry Lavenel, but not so long as his mother lived; oh! as to that, no! She did not wish any mother-in-law! But if, taking pity on the weariness she must feel, after so well-filled a life, God should call the old dame to Himself—first, Lavenel would be richer, and then who knew but that they might perhaps leave the grain and flour trade, so as to go to Pieux, and make the land more valuable? Philomène had always dreamed of directing some great work, and of making servants, as they say, “walk under finger and eye!”

But never so long as the Parisians should be there! They would not remain there always. One obtains, by striving, two grindings out of the same bag of flour, but cannot obtain a third. They would disgust the Parisians with the place, which would not be very difficult; and when Philomène had made them furnish all they could, that would benefit or be pleasant for her, they would leave, never to return, shaking from off their sandals the dust of the country that had deceived them, and Madame Crépin would be free to act according to her humor.

Verroy could give over Diélette to public vengeance, and erase it from the number of honest places where the friends of repose and simplicity could pass a few weeks.

What did Philomène care? First, she had never thought about it; and then, if she had thought, she would only have shrugged her shoulders. What could that matter to her?

She had told Lavenel that her cousins had asked her to leave them property; that it was only to their obsessions that she had given the imprudent promise; she feigned to fear their vengeance; and the poor man, duly trained, had repeated his lesson. But, strangely, he did not believe a word that Philomène said to him about her fortune, her intentions, or of anything that concerned her interests. He knew she was false and untruthful, and still he had unhesitatingly swallowed this falsehood and calumny, probably because not being the object of it, what concerned his neighbor was indifferent to him. And then it is so sweet to think evil of others!

When this rumor reached Madame Aubier's ears, she shook her head with a displeased air.

"No," said she to the kind soul who had brought it to her, "I will never believe the Verroys capable of such a thing, and I think them incapable of revenging themselves for a disappointment. I do not wish to know who told you that, my dear lady; but, whoever it was, you must tell her she is mistaken, and that she would do well to reflect twice before repeating a thing that might draw upon her something disagreeable and well deserved. I am sure, if Monsieur Verroy heard that spoken of, he would go back to the source of it, and it would end badly for all those who have mixed themselves up in it!"

"At least, you are not going to tell it to him, Madame Aubier!" exclaimed the alarmed gossip. . .

"I never repeat gossip," replied the good lady, "it is more than enough to listen to it; but I advise you to be more prudent."

Virginie, who had listened without saying a word, waited till the visitor had left; then she came forward.

"Because you are good and just, godmother, I think as you do. It seems to me impossible that the gentleman and lady who were here the other day should be capable of so low an idea."

"You are right, child; they are good, nice people, and I would put my hand in the fire, if that is not another trick of Philomène's. Here is a basket of nice strawberries," she continued after a silence; "will you go and take them to La Heuserie, to your friends, the Parisians?"

"Oh, godmother!" said Virginie, blushing with pleasure. "All alone?"

"Are you afraid the wolf will eat you?"

"No, godmother, but I don't know them."

"You will know them. Go at once; it seems to me that I ought to make them reparation for the disagreeable things I have just heard. If I had better legs I would go with you; but I am no longer of an age for tripping over the roads. Go, child."

Virginie took from the anteroom a large hat, made of common straw, and trimmed with black velvet, possessed herself of the basket, and with a merry heart and brisk step she set forth towards La Heuserie.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WOLF.

THE afternoon was lovely; the sea rolled with a dreamy regularity, and the silver fringe that bordered the waves left small flakes of foam on the fine sand, that shone in the sunshine. Light clouds floated very high in the heavens, and millions of spangles danced on the sea in the tremblings of the waves. Virginie walked on with her basket, like Little Red Riding Hood, happy and proud to be sent as a messenger to the renowned Parisians.

The seeds of the dandelions which children call "travellers," and which floated on every side in the June air, were not lighter than the young girl's heart. She went on, blowing at times on a little "traveller" that slowly passed her face, looking at the bay with admiration without quite realizing what she felt; then, casting her eyes on the grassy hill-tops, saying to herself, that it was all very beautiful, and that life was very sweet.

Happy youth! There are hours when approaching twenty years of age, in which the heart suddenly grows warm and swells, and like unto a balloon floats away to the far heights of heaven without one's knowing the reason why. A bright day comes, a gentle wind shakes the leaves, the "travellers" fly about on all sides, a thrush warbles on a branch, and behold! all at once one

says to one's self, that life is good and long, that the future will be happy, that the world is full of unexplored joys. When we are past thirty we no longer know the charm of such reveries: joys have come, but the rest has come too, alas!

Virginie was not yet twenty years old, and on such a beautiful day it seemed impossible to her that something pleasant should not happen to her. She had read much in fairy tales, and—here we will make a parenthesis.

There have been found very wise people full of practical sense, of cleverness even, who have declared the perusal of fairy tales pernicious, and calculated to pervert the judgment of childhood. These wise persons are certainly right, for it is undeniable that animals speak no human tongue whatever, that magicians cannot change pumpkins into chariots, and that kings' sons marry in preference princesses of their own rank when they can find them; but has a child ever been met with so little intelligence as really to believe in so many wonders? A child is not as credulous as one supposes: if he has an absolute faith in his father's and mother's word, it is because he looks them in their eyes while they are talking; it is on account of a habit born with his first cries, which has taught him that his parents love him and only wish his welfare. But if a stranger tries to tell him some extraordinary fact, to give him some information that seems improbable to his mind—which is intolerant because he is ignorant—the child looks at the stranger with the undefinable arch look of one who feigns to be deceived through good-breeding,

and says afterwards: "He thought I believed him, but it is not true, papa, is it?" A child does not believe in fairy tales any more than he believes in Santa Claus; but he finds an extraordinary pleasure in persuading himself that he believes in them. After the disagreeable lesson, the scolding master, the little burn that makes him suffer, after the punishment that deprives him of his dessert, after the task or verb to be studied during recreation—it is very nice to say to himself: "Ah! if there were only fairies! If the ceiling could open to let a marvellous lady pass through, covered with satin and diamonds, who would carry me off to her palace! How would the palace be made?" At once the task, the burn, the master, the dry bread, are forgotten, and the child dreams of chimeras appropriate to his age; just as later, he will dream of an infinite, eternal love—as later still, he will dream of being a prefect or of having a red ribbon.

Who would wish to deprive a young man of believing in the disinterested love of his washerwoman? who would have the courage to refuse the small tradesman the hope of having some day a country house on a hill-side in the environs of Paris? Neither the one nor the other really believe in their dream, but they love to persuade themselves that they do. And that is happiness! Do we not all speak of dreams that in the very depths of ourselves we know cannot be realized?

Virginie had read many fairy tales, and of course, be it understood, did not believe in them, but she loved to recall them, and, as she was walking, she mingled confusedly in

her memory, Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, and The Ass's Skin.

On the road to La Heuserie one could not meet wolves or kings' sons; however, she said to herself, that if the king's son had passed on the road the day that the wolf eat Little Red Riding Hood, attracted by the poor child's cries, he would have burst in the door, killed the wolf, and carried off the little shepherdess to his mother, the queen's house; the queen was kind, Little Red Riding Hood amiable and charming; in spite of the futility of her character the king's son would have married her, and then—

"Where are you going like that, my pretty young lady?" said a voice, quite close to Virginie.

"It is the wolf!" thought she, with a shiver that shook the basket of strawberries, and made some fall on the ground.

It was not the wolf! it was Lavenel, who made henceforth every day an inspection around La Heuserie. The master's eye, you see!

Recovered from her fright, Virginie bowed to the grain merchant, whom she had known since a long while.

"I am going to see the Parisians," said she, "to take them this basket of strawberries my godmother sends them."

Lavenel, faithful to his habit, took two strawberries out of the basket, and ate them without ceremony; then he raised his eyes on the young girl, and seemed quite astonished.

"You have grown very much since last year," said he, with more grace than he generally showed in the relations of life. "How old are you, Mademoiselle Virginie?"

"I will be twenty on All-Saints' day," replied the young girl.

"And you are going to La Heuserie? I am going a little farther; I do not wish to detain you."

He walked on with Virginie, and on the way asked her a thousand questions relative to her father, to the state of his affairs, and his plans. Without distrust the young girl answered him frankly. First, she did not know how to lie; and then Lavenel, about to marry Philomène, was nearly a married man, and in her eyes, a man forty years old, married or nearly so, was a venerable personage.

Never will people of forty years of age know how old they seem to those who are only twenty!

Lavenel thus learned that Monsieur Beuron had bought three pieces of land, that he had replaced a bad cow for two good ones, that his last crop of oats had been sold for a fifth more than his neighbor's, because its quality was very much superior; and all this gave him much to reflect upon. He walked with his head down, buried in profound meditation, when suddenly:

"And you, Mademoiselle Virginie, when are you going to marry?" said he, in a gentle voice.

"I? There is time enough. Besides, I am very hard to please!"

"You have the right to be," the grain merchant replied,

gallantly; but to correct what might be too amiable in that phrase, he added, immediately:

"A rich young lady like yourself has a right to aspire to what is best."

"I am not very rich," Virginie replied, innocently.

"Bah! you certainly have two thousand francs income?"

"Only eighteen hundred."

"Ah! well, that is very nice! Is it in land?"

"No, in ready money. It is a fancy of my father's, who wished to liquidate what I inherited from my mother as soon as she died, so that he should have no trouble when I became of age."

"In crowns!" repeated Lavenel. "It is an odd idea, and not a very good one; for you know, Mademoiselle, people around here like land better."

"My husband, however, will have to be satisfied with it," replied Virginie, smiling.

"Land, you see," continued Lavenel, "can be seen, can be touched"—he struck the ground with his inelegant foot—"while bonds, what are they? Only paper! There is nothing but land under the sun!"

Virginie scarcely listened to him; La Heuserie was not far distant, and the young girl was asking herself how she should turn her little complimentary speech on arriving, when Lavenel troubled her meditation.

"But your father has no other child?" said he. "You are his only heiress?"

Virginie gently shook her head.

"There is a second wife," said she, with a shadow of sadness in her sweet-toned voice. "I think he will leave her his fortune."

"Ah! the devil! Only the half of it, at most!" exclaimed Lavenel, suddenly, much warmed. "One does not disinherit one's child. What is this you tell me?"

Virginie continued to shake her head very gently, and he went on, with fresh vehemence:

"That is tangible property, furnished houses and buildings! If it were papers—bonds, titles of incomes, payable to the bearer—such as they have nowadays, I would say nothing! But as to tangible property—it cannot be! You can plead, you can gain the suit!"

"Ah! Monsieur Lavenel," said the young girl, sadly, "there is no lawsuit to be made. They have made a contract, and what they owned is not to be in common!"

Lavenel, who had cooled a little, took a few steps without saying anything; then, returning to a mysterious idea which he did not emit—

"Was your father rich when he married the second time?" asked he.

"He was comfortably off."

"Then you will have the half of what he owned at that time! You are an heiress, Mademoiselle Virginie! Do you understand law?"

"A little," answered the young girl, with a melancholy tone. "One is obliged to do so, when one has to protect one's property!"

"You do well! An heiress should always understand

law! Well, as to myself, should I marry,"—here Virginie looked at him askant, but he pretended not to see it—"I would wish to put everything in common, so that my wife's interests would only be one with mine, and I would know how to protect them, I can tell you!"

"Philomène's people (relations) have only to hold out well!" thought Virginie. "*Au revoir*, Monsieur Lavenel," said she, out loud, "here I am."

"To one of these days, Mademoiselle," answered Philomène's gallant, honoring the young girl with a great bow with his hat.

CHAPTER XII.

A SUDDEN INVASION.

VIRGINIE entered the yard ; at the noise of the bar falling, Marie appeared at the first-story window.

“Charles,” said she, to her husband, “there is the Greuze coming with a basket of strawberries.”

Charles ran rapidly down the stairs to see the Greuze, and nearly fell on the young girl, who drew back a step, smiling.

“That is what comes of too much haste, Mademoiselle,” said he, conducting her into the room on the ground floor ; “in my impatience to see you, I nearly killed you.”

Virginie began to laugh ; this unceremonious manner put her at her ease, and her sympathy for the Parisians redoubled, when she saw Marie enter, cordial and merry as usual, who, holding out both her hands, and taking her basket, addressed her at once half a dozen friendly questions, all calculated to provoke the confidence and to encourage the young provincial girl's timidity.

“Was it yourself, Mademoiselle, who thought of coming, or rather your godmother who sent you ?” asked Charles, who loved to see the young girl's white teeth appear from under her timid and kindly smile.

“I do not wish to tell an untruth, Monsieur,” said she ; “it was my godmother who bade me come ; but she knew very well the pleasure she gave me.”

"Nicely answered," said the novelist, with an air of approbation. "And do you think, Mademoiselle Virginie, you will have as much pleasure in returning another time?"

"As to that, I am very sure," replied she, looking at Marie.

By the end of five minutes, the most perfect cordiality reigned between our three friends, and one would have said they had known each other all their lives.

It sometimes happens that a sympathy of opinion on the most essential points is understood between persons who see each other for the first time—a word, a look meetly exchanged, makes one divine that the new-comer thinks and feels like one's self—then a great cordiality is established, that is all the stronger, because it is so sudden, and that it gives to the new friends the unhopèd-for pleasure of an agreeable discovery.

This was what happened to Virginie in regard to the young couple: she felt herself their friend, and immediately, with the enthusiasm which is one of the most beautiful gifts of her age, they became as dear to her as though she had known them all her life.

Charles made Virginie tell him about the impressions of her childhood; he found an extraordinary charm of freshness and grace in the recital of the young girl's thoughts, who, more intelligent than her surroundings, was still, however, a stranger to all vanity and ambition.

"And have you never desired to live in large cities?" asked he, at length.

"Never!" answered the young girl. "I could live there, perhaps, as well as another, for I imagine one must meet many beautiful things in them, and also kind people," added she, looking at Madame Verroy, while her pretty face became covered with a blush at the thought of her boldness.

A shadow appeared upon the door—always open according to the patriarchal custom of the country—and amidst a cry of joy and astonishment, and Charles' and Marie's hearty laughter, there was seen to fall at Virginie's feet, who drew back with affright, a straw hat, a case for another, a travelling easel, a parasol, and an artist's folding-chair, a gourd, a box of paints, a handkerchief tied at the four corners containing linen and shoes, and a large body, clad in gray and shod with canvas sandals, stretched itself out at full length on the family bench, exclaiming:

"Ah! well! talk to me of leagues in the country for refreshing a man! I am dead, my friends, I am dead!"

Virginie, who was alarmed, contemplated this invasion without knowing what to say; and a lost cat who had adopted the Verroys' hearth, and who warmed herself thereat usually, with her paws curled up, and her nose on the ashes, now erected her back, hissed, and flew up the chimney.

"It is our friend, Masson," said Charles, to reassure her.

Masson arose, picked up his hat, and made a Louis XIII. bow to the young girl, sweeping the ground with the border of his Yokohama, the which he had paid

forty-five *centimes* for in a shop opposite the railway-station, and said to her in a melodious voice :

"Mademoiselle, I am your very humble servant."

Every one burst out laughing, and Virginie, growing emboldened, aided Marie in picking up all the luggage that was strewn on the ground.

"Accept, mesdames, my humble apologies for the trouble I give you," groaned Masson, reassuming his place on the bench, "but I have walked six leagues, with the little things that you behold, and in canvas sandals!"

Those fantastic shoes, covered with mud of all colors, had gained on the way a double sole of clay, that was far more thick than the first, and laughter began again.

Marie brought wine, fruit, bread and butter; and Virginie, who had decidedly adopted her, following her everywhere, had ended by discovering, one knew not how, but with that intuition of poodles and persons who have loving hearts, a glass, knives and forks, and a napkin, and Masson left his horizontal position and seated himself before the feast.

At the moment when, having filled his glass, he was about to carry it to his lips, he stopped and raised it to his brow.

"I drink to the hospitable gods," said he to his hosts; "to Hebe!" added he, turning towards Virginie, who, amazed, lowered her eyes, half smiling.

After having emptied his glass, Masson attacked the solids, and, after some moments, during which the others had looked at him eating :

"I feel better," said he. "This is how it all happened—"

A slight noise attracted his attention towards the chimney; he saw the cat, who, having recognized the absence of all danger, carefully descended the pot-hook and returned to her beloved ashes that were still warm.

"As our number is now complete," said he, "I begin: Night before last I was strapping my valise, when I saw Benedict enter; I had left my key in my door, and you will learn, by-and-by, what that negligence cost me! Benedict entered then, looked at me packing up my effects, and remarking a superb pair of hunting shoes, that had never assisted at the killing of anything but a hare last year, he said to me:

"What are you going to do with those?"

"Wear them down there," replied I.

"Down there—where?"

"In Normandy, on the beach, in the sand."

"In the sand, where?"

"Somewhere near Pieux."

"Pieux? that is inland; I was there five or six years ago."

"Well! on the cliffs, somewhere; there are cliffs there, the de-vil!"

"Oh! yes, my friend, there are some there! But do you imagine you can walk in that country in *gendarme's* boots? It's all rocks, my friend, all rocks! You would say you were walking on *curry-combs* with their points up in the air! Never could you walk there in those."

"He turned my beautiful boots round with disdain,

and having said this, he let them fall on the floor from the height of a *mère*. I confess they *were* heavy.

“‘What do you wish me to put on my feet, then?’ I asked him, with the innocence of a lamb who baas, calling the butcher.

“‘Canvas sandals, my dear, canvas sandals! They are supple and soft, the thick sole preserves one from the points of the rocks, and then one is so comfortable in them!’

“Sybaritism and the natural cowardice of man aiding, I bought some beautiful canvas sandals; you see them”—Masson stretched out his feet that had no longer any form or color—“and I put them in my travelling bag. I left—I arrived—as they say in dramas. They deposited me at a little station covered with roses. Oh! such roses! I have never seen so many, except on your cheeks, Mademoiselle,” said he, turning towards Virginie, who was listening to him with wide-opened eyes; “there was also a carriage there—a sort of stage-wagon—that brought me to Pieux. Till there, everything went well; it was this morning, about ten o’clock, at Pieux, and apropos, why do they call it Pieux? Without making a pun,* there is only one, the belfry of the church, which one can see at least from the outskirts of Paris, so never-ending is it. There I refreshed myself, and I asked the inn-keeper—who could have thought of him? he had the air of such an honest man!—I asked him if Diçlette was far away, and if that place was far from the one before it.

* Pieux, meaning in French pious persons.—TRANSLATOR’S NOTE.

“‘It is a short hour from here by the cross-roads,’ the inn-keeper answered.

“‘Very well,’ said I, ‘I will go on foot.’

“I shouldered all that you see there; I looked like Dupuis in the *Cigale*, but not so nice, you know, and behold me off by the cross-road. I walked a short hour, and then a long one, and I did not see the sea; my man had told me that a little before reaching your house I would see the sea. I said to myself it was because I was too much loaded, that I did not march in regulation step, and then I walked another short hour. Then—I had patent-leather boots; on they are there, tied in the handkerchief—my toes began to burn, and I sat down upon the edge of a hillside and put on my canvas sandals, my triumphant sandals, and I set forth again with a lighter step certainly.

“When I had walked a short *kilomètre*, I felt quite comfortable, but, nevertheless, the leagues of the country began to seem long to me. Then the landscape changed; no more heaths, but ravines, delicious ravines, with adorable brooks, filled with delectable cresses, that made me think of the *Cyropedia*, and of roast chicken; then more ravines, more brooks, more cresses. I think I said to myself, ‘Friend Masson! you have lost the cross-road.’ And, in effect, I had lost it! But I found another, and besides, when one loses a cross-road, it is not lost for every one.”

Here another shadow appeared in the door, and Philomène entered quietly; at this sight Virginie blushed, the

cat again fled, and Marié rose to offer a chair. A short moment of general discomfiture followed, then Masson continued his story, but without any pleasure or gayety—fatigue had evidently gotten the upper hand. Virginie left, accompanied by the pleadings of Charles and his wife to renew her visit often.

“I have no voice in the chapter,” said Masson, bowing; “but if I dared, Mademoiselle, I would express the same wish.”

In thanking him, Virginie gave him a look so full of mischief and of fun, that the young man was amazed.

“She is charming! she is charming! she is charming!” said he, when she had disappeared. “One can very well steal that verse from Monsieur Augier, in speaking of such an amiable girl!”

“Since we have known her, my dear,” replied Verroy, “we have said nothing else to each other!”

Philomène threw towards the door, through which Virginie had disappeared, a sullen look, full of threatenings, but the door did not seem moved by it; and Masson, who had followed it, was not moved any the more, but he lodged it in his memory, to take it out later—when the time and season arrived.

CHAPTER XIII.

HOW HAPPY COULD I BE WITH EITHER.

LAVENEL had returned to his home—for no business whatever had led him in the direction of La Heuserie—reflecting profoundly on many secret things.

First, through what singular chance had it happened that Virginie Beuron had delayed that year the visit she generally made her godmother at Easter time? People who change their habits are truly insupportable! One is accustomed to see them in April, they arrive in July; and one doesn't even know where one is in the seasons.

And then how pretty she was, that little girl! The year before she was not much to look at. Those little thinnish girls who change their feathers often cause one these surprises; but it is stupid, for truly one does not know any longer what to count on with them! She was black, behold her white and pink; she was long, with spider claws put for arms in her shoulders; and now she has superb arms. It is absurd!

And then what a droll sort of body—the father Beuron—to have put his daughter's fortune in crowns!

Lavenel had slandered crowns; first, because it is the custom of the Normand country, and then because it was his whim to slander them just then; but at the bottom it would be a very fine advantage for the coming son-in-law,

on the condition, however, that the son-in-law was an intelligent man, who would not go and dream of reconverting the crowns into land! Crowns! they are made to roll! Trade, for instance, that lives from credit, but also from a great deal of ready money, that was what that pretty *dot* in sounding crowns needed!

Here Lavenel thought of his debts; he owed around the world ten thousand francs, and found it hard to pay the interest at twelve per cent. His lender was very amiable, and did not reclaim any reimbursement either near at hand or in the distance; but twelve per cent. a year—that made one per cent. a month—and when there are a great many hundreds, it is an income! An income that one would have to regain here and there on grain, wheat and issues. Lavenel sighed.

How unattractive Philomène was! Hold! there she was coming, with her angular walk, her fist resting backwards on her hip, as though she were giving herself a thrust to send herself forward! What a difference between Philomène and Virginie! Eh! eh! but then it was natural; for between those two women there was a flight of twenty years of age.

Lavenel thought over Virginie's charms; and to avoid the sight of his betrothed, he opened a fence, entered a field, and disappeared from sight.

His thoughts had followed him, however; for, on entering his house, he threw with a bad humor three sprigs of clover—sometimes called sweet pink trefoil—on the table. From over her spectacles old Madame

Lavenel contemplated the three sprigs for a long time, then her son, then the three sprigs again, and ended by asking :

“What is that?”

“That,” replied her son, “is some clover of Louis Bon-Marin’s, that I picked in his grass-field!”

“Ah!” said the old woman, without ceasing to cast her eyes from the clover to her heir. She did not seize the relation between the sprigs of hay and Master Theodore Lavenel’s bad humor.

The latter dragged his hat over his eyes, plunged his Punchinello’s nose and his sharp-pointed chin in the mysteries of his cravat, with its many folds; then, without any preamble:

“Do you know, mother,” said he, “that Virginie Beuron will have thirty-six francs of *dot* in ready money?”

“No, my boy,” answered the old woman, who stopped looking at her son, and the sprigs of clover, to return to her knitting, for she had understood the enigma.

“And then the half of her father’s fortune, at the latter’s death?”

Madame Lavenel shook her head negatively, and set her needles to work dextrously.

“And a pretty girl is Virginie, and amiable, and polite!”

He made a few turns around the shop, gave a kick to an empty bag that was lying on the floor, and suddenly, between his teeth:

"I deserve my fate," said he; "one needs to be an imbecile to wish to marry Philomène!"

For a moment the steel needles beat the measure of a little rapid and melancholy tune.

"There is nothing done about it yet," said Madame Lavenel, slowly.

Theodore turned around brusquely.

"You said, mother?"

"There is nothing done about it," repeated the old woman with her tranquil voice.

Lavenel came and leaned on the counter, placed his two elbows on it, his head in his two hands, and for a quarter of an hour the mother and son talked to each other in a low voice, as they do in melodramas.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN IDEAL WIFE.

“NOW that you have some one with you,” said Philomène to her cousin, the next morning, a little before the hour for breakfast, “I will come no more, except when you have need of me.”

Leaning over the hearth, Marie was making an omelette by the aid of a nice, bright beech-wood fire, that danced briskly around the stove; she raised her fork in the air with which she was superintending the cooking, looked at Madame Crépin, and said to her in astonishment:

“Why?”

“Because I don’t wish to trouble you in your friendly relations,” the widow replied, with the modesty which formed her most lovely appanage.

Marie shrugged her shoulders, and plunged her fork in the beaten eggs.

“I don’t see in what you could trouble us,” said she, after a moment, “and I do not see, either, why you say such things; you know very well it annoys me.”

“I do not wish to annoy you, my dear,” answered Madame Crépin, in a piqued tone; “it is just exactly in order not to annoy you that henceforth I shall stay at home.”

“Come, Philomène,” said Madame Verroy, leaving her

post of trust, "why do you say such absurdities? You get angry, one knows not for what reason. You take a fancy not to come here for eight days, I do not ask you for what motive; you come then, every day, during another week; I am delighted at it. You are as free as the air here. What whim has made you feel the necessity of announcing to me your sedentary caprice? If you wished to stop at home, and not cause me annoyance, you should have done so without speaking of it!"

Philomène did not answer, but turned her back to the light, and there remained standing, motionless like a child placed in punishment, during which time Marie deposited the omelette on the table.

"Where are our gentlemen?" said she, glancing around the room. She then perceived Madame Crépin's woful countenance, and approached her.

"Well?" putting her hand on her shoulder.

Philomène turned away her head and smothered a sob!

"Tears?" said Marie, more irritated at the bottom of her heart than she would have liked to avow. "Come, Philomène, what is the matter?"

"You treat me harshly," said the widow, swallowing her tears. "I only love you, in all the world; it is very painful to me to have my friendship and delicacy so strangely rewarded!"

Marie said to herself that Philomène chose her moments of effusion very inopportunistically, for the omelette was growing cold with the rapidity peculiar to omelettes. Madame Verroy resolved to end the situation at once.

"Sit down there, great stupid!" said she, laying her two hands on her cousin's shoulders, which precipitated Madame Crépin in a chair; "sit up at the table, eat some omelette, and don't say any more absurdities!"

She repaired what there might have been too uncere-
monious in this speech by a kiss on both her cheeks, and went out to call the two young men, whom she found in the court-yard.

"I don't like eggs," said Philomène; "they do not agree with me."

"You have said that to us before, cousin," said Charles, who, entering the first, was alone welcomed by this confidence; "but, don't worry! There must be something else."

There was something else; in effect, and Philomène did not seem to suffer from indigestion, for, in spite of her recent emotion, she gave proof of a fine appetite. Masson, who was placed opposite to her, looked at her with a certain curiosity. She had not an ordinary face, certainly; the expression of her physiognomy, which was very changeful, being sometimes sour, sometimes quite open and expansive, totally modified her features with a clear and very decided sweep; so that frequently in an hour's time, one would see before them, not one Philomène only, but quite a collection of Philomènes.

"Well, Masson," said Charles, when the omelette had disappeared, "what are they doing at Paris?" •

"Walking on the Boulevards during the day, going into *cafés*, and in the evening going to the theatre," replied Masson, with the beatified air of one who no longer accomplishes any of those duties whatever.

"What are they playing at the theatres?" asked Charles.

"The 3000th of *Macdam en pâte* and the 495th of *Hurluberlus*," replied the actor, crossing his arms.

"Always the same things?"

"Always."

"What do they do without you at your theatre?"

"They replace me, in what I play! I appear in the third act and I say to the figurants: 'By heaven, my lords! you have done a sorry task!' Then I pass my sword through Gadoreau's body, you know that little Gadoreau? and I go home—make myself a cup of tea and read your novels!"

Marie laughed; Philomène looked at her with a reproachful air; she did not understand, but it seemed to her there was nothing to laugh at in that. Then this gentleman, who used "thee" and "thou" in speaking to Charles, played at a theatre! Philomène had never been in one.

"And your mother?" asked Charles.

"She still curses me."

"And still sends you money?"

"Of course! But what she sends me is nothing in comparison to what she spends in masses and tapers so as to make me return to the pale of the church."

"And it does not succeed?"

"Not at all! What would you have me do, once I returned there, eh?"

"You have still, then, the same artistic vocation?" asked Marie.

"I? not the least in the world! I never had any vocation! Only my mother and my late uncle the Abbé wished to make me enter a seminary; I was seventeen years old; I had finished my studies; in order to be one with them I entered the Conservatoire; but I should never have thought of the Conservatoire except for the Seminary."

"That is curing opposites by opposites, according to the rules," said Charles: "you are a great doctor, Masson."

"And you remain at the theatre, all the same?" asked Marie, smiling.

"What would you have me do? Where the goat is tied, it must browse!" the young man replied, philosophically. "Some day I shall inherit ten thousand francs income; that day I shall 'leave the boards,' as they say, and go and raise cabbages."

"Never!" said Charles; "you will never raise cabbages! It is not in your nature!"

"That's possible! Well, then! I will install myself in a small house in the environs of Paris; I will not raise cabbages there, I will marry, I will be a good husband, a good father, and all that follows."

"That is not my horoscope," said Marie; "you will turn some heiress' head who will marry you by force, and you will become a millionaire."

"I am not conceited!" replied Masson, caressing his face with a complacent air; "I do not aspire to such high destiny!"

They all laughed at the gesture, not at the words;

Philomène continued to stare at the young actor as she could have stared at the elephant at the *Jardin des Plantes*.

"No," continued Masson, "I have another ideal! I shall marry a young, amiable girl, not too clever, but who will know a little about cooking; she must bring me fifty thousand francs—for I am not rich enough for two—and then the little ones!—I wish her to be pretty—ugly women are so horrid!—and provided she has a good disposition, we will be very happy!"

"*Aurea mediocritas*," said Charles.

"Exactly."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-five, in a week."

"That is the lovely age!" said Charles. "I was thirty-five two years ago, so I now find thirty-seven a still lovelier age."

Masson and Madame Verroy laughed; Philomène, who was still serious, looked at them, and asked herself from what menagerie all these persons, whom until now she had deemed sensible persons, had come!

"What an odd thing, the ideal is!" said Charles. "I remember when I was twenty I dreamed of finding a blonde with black eyes, small and coquettish, with the graces of a child; I carried that ideal about for some years in every corner of France; and then one fine evening I met Marie, a brunette, tall and innocent as a girl who has never looked a man in the face; I fell in love, and—you know the rest!"

"The moral of which story," said Masson, in a didactic tone, "is, that one must not have an ideal!"

"On the contrary," Marie said, eagerly, "one must have one, and change it! One has thus the pleasure of comparison!"

Our friends laughed heartily: Philomène smiled vaguely.

"And you, Madame," asked Masson, politely, "what is your opinion?"

"Oh! I, Monsieur," answered the widow, with ease, "I have no opinion. A poor, ignorant peasant like myself should listen to others and keep silence!"

"*Voilà!*" thought Charles. "Now a chill will fall."

A chill did fall upon them, in effect, and the repast ended less gayly than it had begun.

CHAPTER XV.

GRATUITOUS ADVICE.

WHEN they had left the table to go into the little garden, that was invaded with grass, full of shadow and of sunshine sifting through the branches, Masson approached Madame Verroy.

"Perhaps I hurt your cousin?" said he, with the kindness natural to his character. "Suppose I try to repair my foolishness? But tell me how I could have hurt her; for I do not know at all, I assure you."

"Philomène is whimsical," Marie answered him. "She has had great sorrows; she has borne them in a worthy manner; we do not get angry with her about her small caprices; after so much trouble, it is natural she should be a little soured."

In a few words, Madame Verroy made Masson acquainted with the events of Madame Crépin's life, and the good fellow began to pity her with all his heart.

"Does she love you?" he asked Marie. "She seems very devoted to you."

"She gives us proofs of her friendship all the time," the young woman answered. "I think our advent has been of great benefit to her, by withdrawing her from the gloom in which she was plunged."

"If she loves you," said Masson, "I will love her, too;

for Charles and yourself are the best people in the world. *Vive! cousin Philomène!*"

Marie left him, and Philomène immediately approached her cousin.

"Have you talked about me?" said she to her; "what did he say to you?"

Without minding the incongruity of this question, Marie related in a few words the preceding conversation.

"He has an excellent heart," she added, in speaking of Masson; "you love us, and he loves us; I believe you will soon be very great friends."

Philomène pressed her cousin's hand.

"How kind you are!" said she, with effusion. "After a short silence, she continued: "What an odd woman that Madame Aubier is! She does not stand on much ceremony, to have sent you her great stupid of a god-daughter, like that!"

"Virginie? Why, we find her delightful, in every way. On the contrary, it was a very gracious attention on the old lady's part. The strawberries were a hundred times better brought by that pretty girl!"

"Pretty!" answered Philomène, vivaciously; "do you find her pretty?"

"Extremely pretty, with her great, soft eyes, and her modest smile."

"A large, round face, that expresses nothing!" said the widow, with bitterness; "a great mouth, and eyes like an owl's. Heavens! how can one find anything attractive in Virginie Beuron? And then, she is so stupid! Are you going to encumber yourself with that girl?"

"She did not seem stupid to me," answered Marie, in a graver voice than usual. "She seemed to us to possess a happy nature and a good character."

"She says everything she thinks!" Madame Crépin exclaimed, inconsiderately.

"Well, perhaps that is a merit," replied Madame Verroy, rather curtly. Then, fearing to have offended her cousin, she added, with sweetness: "I have remarked, Philomène, that you have very unreasonable antipathies; you make monsters to yourself of things and people, often without the least motive. I understand that the trials of your life have made you distrustful; but that is no reason why we, who have no cause for being suspicious, should espouse your antipathies without examining them. Virginie is an honest girl; you have said nothing but what was good of her before; you were pleased that we should receive her here in the intimacy that our country life authorizes."

"You are quite free to receive whom you wish, my dear," answered Philomène immediately, with great sincerity in her voice and look. "Certainly those people are honest persons, and there is nothing to say against them, only I had imagined that people like yourselves must know what beauty and cleverness are; and I never should have dreamed you could have found either one or the other in Virginie, that is all! If I had been told so, I would have sworn to the contrary."

"Well, my good friend, you would have been mistaken, and that proves once again that one must swear to nothing."

Philomène smiled, half honey-like, and half like vinegar, and then spoke no more of retiring to her tent.

CHAPTER XVI.

A TRUMP-CARD.

“COUSIN!” said Philomène, the following Sunday afternoon, whilst Masson was struggling over a water-color sketch of La Heuserie, and Verroy was watching him, and criticising all he did with the free and easy manner of those who ignore everything about art.

“Well?” replied the young man, without moving. “Masson, you are making your tree too green!”

“It is green, however—the deuce! I cannot make it red!” replied the actor, looking for colors on his porcelain palette.

“No, not red—but it is not necessary to make it emerald-green.”

“That is true; I will find another shade.”

“Cousin, pray excuse me,” said Charles, turning round, “I am at your disposition.”

Philomène, who had awaited patiently the end of the preceding dialogue, sat down on a stone step opposite to Verroy and began her attack.

“Cousin, do you understand business?” said she, in a high, clear voice.

“That depends, cousin, on what you call business,” Verroy wisely replied.

“Money affairs, cousin; affairs that do not go on well by themselves.”

"Money affairs, cousin, go on well, rarely, by themselves. However, I think I understand you, and I will answer that I have had in former times some contests with publishers, editors of newspapers, and even with a landlord a short time ago, who wished to make me pay six thousand francs for reparations in an apartment, costing two thousand francs a year, that I had taken in a bad condition and inhabited six months. A thousand francs a month for repairs! But I paid him nothing whatever, and I learned in that affair a certain knowledge of business—of some kind of business."

"That is what I require, cousin," Philomène replied, graciously; she was determined not to allow herself to be nonplussed. "I have some debtors at Paris who will not pay me; what shall I do to obtain my money?"

Charles meditated for an instant, and with his finger pointed out to Masson on his paper a portion of a wall that was falling into the brook in an alarming manner. The young man made a sign with his head, took a plumber's line, made a gesture of thanks to his friend with his left hand, and applied himself to re-establishing the equilibrium of his architecture.

"Are your debtors tradespeople?" Charles asked Philomène.

"Yes, cousin."

She told no falsehood; her only debtor was a tradesman, and his debt was insignificant.

"Apply to the Tribunal of Commerce."

"At Paris?"

"Apparently !"

Philomène sighed.

"A poor widow is much to be pitied," said she ; "if one intrusts lawyers, notaries and others to settle difficulties, they manage together so well that the sum is eaten up before the affair is ended."

"It is the common fate," said Charles.

"If I were rich," continued the widow, "I would let those credits go, they will certainly give me more trouble than they are worth ; but I am not rich, and I cannot let them be lost."

Masson, growing impatient at the confidential tone the conversation was taking, hummed in a low voice the words of the "Cantonnier :

*Cu prouve que les malheureux
S'ils sont malheureux
Eh ben, c'est malgré eux !*

Philomène continued, immovably :

"You see, cousin, I sold a while ago the house and the cattle on the farm I inherited from my father ; the new farmer bringing all the material for cultivation : I received half of the money, and I am to receive on Saint Michael's day two thousand two hundred francs—"

Masson, who was surprised, turned round suddenly. He had thought, with her more than plain clothes, her peasant's manners, her hard hands, and her ugly little linen caps, that Philomène was a poor relation to whom the Verroys offered hospitality in order to lighten her

expenses; but a farm that was worth nearly five thousand francs implied a large farm. Was Madame Crépin rich? What did her complaints then mean?

"That will go to pay for the liquidation of what I inherited from my husband," continued the impassible widow, although her cat-like eyes had clearly understood Masson's gesture; "but I need a few hundred francs more, and the money owing me at Paris would have furnished them very timely if the people would only pay me."

Charles, who was much bored, had a great desire to go away, but as such impoliteness would have been too flagrant, he contented himself with rising and taking two steps towards the water-color drawing.

"Land, you see, cousin," continued Madame Crépin, "is all very fine on paper—it is easy to say—'I have sixty thousand francs in good land—'"

"Have you as much as sixty thousand francs worth?" asked Charles, seized with a huge desire to tease Philomène.

"Yes, cousin; but if I wished to sell it, I should not get the half of it. You know that land, when one wants to buy it, is worth a great deal; but when one wishes to sell, it is worth nothing at all. And then it brings in hardly three per cent., and from farms still less. Ah! I have a great deal of trouble to make both ends meet! So that I absolutely need to have my credits paid. Can you not undertake my procuration for me, cousin?"

"Ah! no!" exclaimed Charles, with all the energy of a restrained feeling that gains utterance. "No, indeed! You

must not be angry with me, cousin, but I would be too much afraid of spoiling your affairs by putting my hands in them."

"Then I shall have to go to Paris!" groaned Philomène.

"That seems to me the most sensible thing to do."

Madame Crépin remained thoughtful for a moment.

"Living is so dear in hotels," said she. "I wonder if I would not do better to give it all up?"

"I thought Marie had asked you to come to us," said Verroy, decidedly, in a bad humor.

"How kind you are, cousin!" exclaimed Philomène. "I shall never forget all you have done for me. But," added she, "I do not know whether I can decide to take that voyage. I dislike Paris so much, that I never wished even to pass through it. Once I had to join my husband at Bordeaux—well, I went through the centre of France solely from horror of Paris."

"What has Paris done to you?" asked Masson, desirous of changing the conversation.

"It has done nothing to me, Monsieur. I dislike it, that is all!"

"Cousin Philomène has some justifiable aversions," said Charles, smiling a little, very little.

Philomène looked at him; she had not understood, but she smiled also.

"I do not know whether I can overcome my repugnance. I will think about it; meanwhile I thank you for your kind invitation. I should never have been bold enough to have asked you what you offer me—",

"Pass, ball!" thought Masson, "the trick is over. She is very clever, all the same."

"But," continued Philomène, "if I can be of service to you in anything whatever, pray make use of me."

"Thanks, cousin," said Charles. And he added *in petto*: "I had to thank her as usual, or else we would never have had done with it!"

CHAPTER XVII.

FATE GRANTS US WHAT WE DESERVE.

“**I**S your cousin rich, then?” asked Masson, when, the evening having come, Philomène had left La Heuserie. “I thought her as poor as Job!”

“She is the owner of this house, my dear fellow, and of many other things besides! I believe her to be much richer than she wishes to acknowledge; and what seems clearly proved to me is, that she is extraordinarily avaricious!”

“It is an excusable whim,” said the young man; “if, excepting avariciousness, she is good and devoted, as you will not suffer from that defect, you can easily pass it over. How old is she?”

“About forty.”

“Only as much as that? I would have given her five or six years more; that woman is no longer of any age.”

“She thinks, however, of marrying again,” said Charles, maliciously, who kept a grudge against her.

“Oh! Charles,” exclaimed Marie, “you know very well that she denies it all she can!”

“Yes, my dear, but I begin to know her; the conversation of a little while ago made a bushel of scales fall from my eyes. She denies precisely what she is deter-

mined to do. She will marry Lavenel—unless she finds something better !”

“I hope,” ended Masson, “she will invite us all to the wedding !”

“Don’t count on that ! they will be secret nuptials—without any wedding invitations—the witnesses alone will be admitted, and, moreover, they will make them swear never to reveal the bride’s age ; for better precaution there will be cotton balls prepared, and every one will be obliged to put them in his ears—and by the way, Masson, could a marriage be declared null, should the four witnesses to it be attacked with despairing and confirmed deafness ?”

“I know not, my friend ; perhaps there is material in that idea out of which to make a drama for the Ambigu—”

“Or a vaudeville for the Palais Royal !”

Masson took a cigar from his pocket, lit it, and remained thoughtful a moment.

“Are you thinking of the Palais Royal ?” his friend asked him.

“No, I was thinking of Mademoiselle Virginie—it is Virginie you call that pretty girl ? She must have a Paul ?”

“I do not know ; I believe not. Have you heard, Marie, of a Paul whatsoever spoken of for Virginie ?”

“No ! She is difficult to marry. Can you imagine an alliance between that amiable child and a coarse man, who drinks and swears ?”

“It makes me shiver,” said Charles, in a calm tone. “Are there no other persons in this country except people of that stamp ?”

"But, my friend, it is considered a merit. A land-owner would be laughed at, who did not know how to swear properly, and drink a great deal of brandy in his coffee!"

"It would be a murder!" exclaimed Masson, warmly; "Virginie deserves another fate, and she will have it: first, because one always has the fate one merits."

"Do you believe that?"

"Firmly!"

"And the women who are cut in pieces—have they also the fate they merit?"

"The women who are cut in pieces," Masson repeated slowly, while seeking an argument, "that depends; among the quantity, there have certainly been some who deserved it; women who have exasperated their husbands, for instance, and then—no, I think those are about all."

"Then there *were* some who did not deserve it?"

"It must have happened so."

"Well, then! what do you do with your theory?"

"What one does with all theories, my friend; they are put aside when one has no longer any need of them," replied Masson, knocking off the ashes from his cigar; "theories have no other utility."

CHAPTER XVIII.

ANXIETY.

THE sun had disappeared behind the valley, and the moon displayed in the heavens the delicate form of its slender crescent. A penetrating coolness had succeeded the heat of the July day, and the twilight was gliding softly under the trees, invading first the corners, that became of a deep and velvety blackness, then the cavities in the stones, the underside of the cornices, the trunks of the beech trees, the bed of the green and mossy stream, and the open windows, that seemed bottomless abysses. The fading light still floated on the house-roof, in the clumps of verdure, that appeared gilded with a reflection of the sun, on the gray façade, that looked white, and where the groups of lichens made large spots whiter still—indeed, almost radiant in the half-light.

“Your lichens are superb,” said Masson, regarding the rich clothing that ornamented the poverty of the stones.

“Would you believe that Philomène wished to have them scraped off?” answered Charles, in an indignant tone. “She declares they eat away her house!”

“What does that matter,” the young man said, phlegmatically, “provided it is pretty?”

"But, my dear fellow, it is a calumny—lichens never eat away anything! They take nothing from stones or trees, and just see all they add in color and richness! I nearly said something rude!"

"To the lichens?"

"To Philomène! There is one who has not poetical feeling! Can you imagine, now, workmen scraping the stones and cleaning the stream? It would be like renovating our poor obelisk of Luxor again! That was one of the sorrows of my life! It seemed to me, when I saw it cleaned, that it was quite naked, and that it felt ashamed!"

"You love stones too much," answered Masson, "it will be the ruin of you!"

"Why?"

"Because you will build, and that is the death of a man!"

"Build? No! But I should have liked much to have bought this little house."

"What prevents you?"

"Philomène does not wish to sell it."

"Well, my friend, do without it. Resignation to the evils we cannot prevent, is one of the principal virtues of humanity."

Charles, who was a little disturbed by the souvenir of his griefs against Madame Crépin, was walking up and down the court-yard; suddenly he stopped: the gate had opened, and in the increasing shadow he saw two women coming toward him, whom he at first did not recognize.

"Good-evening, gentlemen," said Madame Aubier's voice. "We arrive late, do we not?"

"Dear Madame, is it you?" said Marie, running towards her. "You are welcome here!"

They entered the house; a lamp was brought in and they all saw that the old lady looked very fatigued. Virginie, who was almost as pale as her godmother, watched her with eyes full of tenderness and anxiety.

"But why so late, so far away?" asked Marie.

"I went out this afternoon," said Madame Aubier, speaking with difficulty, "so as to take Virginie a walk, who has not many distractions. My husband was dining at the Preceptor's; we were alone. We came this way, with the intention of surprising you. I have not been a good walker for a long time. Near here, at the beginning of the road, I was taken with a fit of asthma; it has not happened to me for many years. I thought I was going to die."

Marie hurried away, and returned bringing something calming, which they made the old lady take at once.

"You should have come here for help, since you were not far off!" said Charles to the young girl.

"My godmother did not wish it—she was afraid of dying while I should be away; and, to tell the truth, I preferred not to leave her," replied Virginie, growing pale again at the memory of that moment of anguish.

Madame Aubier had recovered her strength a little.

"She was very much frightened, the poor little one," said she, "and I also, to speak frankly; but more for

her than for myself. What would she have done all alone?"

The old woman trembled, and Virginie, in a moment of impulse, forgetting the presence of strangers, threw herself on her knees, her head buried in Madame Aubier's bosom, and let her tears overflow, that were stifling her. Her godmother placed her hand on her hair.

"Poor child, poor child!" said she, several times, caressing her tenderly. "She has no one to love her but myself; her father has no thought for her, and she is very much attached to me!"

Marie approached the young girl, took her by the wrist, raised her, and said to her in her ear:

"You will do your godmother harm!"

Immediately, with a violent effort that brought back the blood to her pallid cheeks, Virginie raised her head, dried her tears, and sat down by Madame Aubier's side, whose hand she held in hers; but her grateful look sought out Marie with the sweetness of a caress.

"This is not all," said the old lady, "I must return home. I have come to ask you to accompany me there, Monsieur Verroy, for I am afraid of being taken ill again on the way, and it must not occur twice with Virginie quite alone."

"We will all go with you," replied Marie. "We will take lanterns, and wrap you up well, Madame Aubier."

"All?" repeated the old woman, looking at Masson, who, overcome with a sudden interest in these simple people, and about these very ordinary events, regarded

it all with the eyes of a man who would much like to be useful and does not know what to do.

"All, Madame, certainly; we will not be too many to escort you."

Marie brought shawls and two lanterns; and Madame Aubier, leaning on Verroy's arm, left the house slowly. Virginie wished to support her on the other side, but Marie put her away gently.

"You are tired," said she to her; "it is my turn. Masson, offer your arm to Mademoiselle Beuron."

Masson rounded his elbow, but the young girl refused it politely.

"I have never taken a man's arm," said she to him. "I would not know how to do it, and it would annoy me in walking."

The young actor said to himself, that one rarely meets a young girl who has never accepted any one's arm, and this reflection inspired him with a fresh respect for Virginie.

They walked side by side in the narrow path, a little behind the others; and Masson felt his heart full of pity and warm sympathy for the poor little one, who had only her godmother to love her. An indifferent father!—that is sometimes seen: and to have a selfish step-mother often occurs; but to possess neither brothers, sisters, nor near relations, nothing but the affection of an old woman, whom Death might carry off from one moment to another! He drew nearer to Virginie.

"You are going to remain with Madame Aubier, are you not?" he said to her, without any preamble.

"I was to have returned to my father's house in two weeks," she answered, quite as simply. "But, since godmother is ill, I can easily obtain permission to remain longer."

Masson felt himself wonderfully happy at this prospect, to which he probably would have been indifferent the day before.

"And then you will come to see us?" said he, gayly.

"If godmother is ill, I cannot leave her!" Virginie answered.

Masson's joy vanished suddenly, and he became serious.

The pace of those preceding them grew slower, and slower. Madame Aubier's strength began to fail. Happily, they were approaching Diçlette. They walked a hundred yards more, and just as they were coming out on the square, Marie called Masson.

"Take my place," said she, in a low voice, "quickly!"

Hardly did the young man have time to put his arm around the old lady before she lost consciousness. A moment of confusion followed. The door opened, however, and, borne by the two men, Madame Aubier was placed on her bed. They sent for her husband and an old, retired physician, who practised no longer, except for his pleasure and the welfare of the inhabitants of the village; and after a certain time, that seemed long to every one, the excellent woman opened her eyes.

"It will be nothing," said the physician. "It is a syncope, caused by the fatigue of the preceding attack, and then the walk! The deuce! Madame Aubier, you

have not your fifteen-year-old legs any longer. You should not run about like that! If it were a gallant you were going to meet, you should have told me. I am nice enough yet!"

He laughed, and stroked his chin; but as soon as he had passed the threshold he assumed an anxious look, and drew Madame Verroy aside.

"I have not the honor of knowing you other than by name, Madame," said he to her; "but you seem to me to be the most sensible person there is here. One cannot count on old Aubier; first, because he has just been dragged away from his dominos, and he hasn't his wits about him yet, and then, even in his normal state he is not extremely lucid! Virginie is a child—can you pass the night here?"

"Certainly," Marie answered. "Is there any danger?"

"There is always danger when a person is liable to smother from one minute to another; but with careful watching there will be much less. Will you remain?"

"Yes, doctor, I will stay."

"Send away your gentlemen; we have no need of them. There are always too many men in a house where there are sick people. Men, you see, are only useful in hospitals, because women have taught them how to nurse."

Verroy and Masson, finding they were to be sent off to La Heuserie, declared they would not go so far; they procured two beds at an inn, and promised to appear at the slightest call.

CHAPTER XIX.

A PRETTY PICTURE.

AT daybreak the door opened softly, the maid went out to get some milk, and the two young men slipped into the house. Marie went to meet them, holding a finger to her lips.

"Everything is going on well," she said; "she passed a good night. Don't wake Virginie."

"Where is she?" asked Masson.

Marie pointed to the open door of the drawing-room.

Amidst disordered things, and furniture moved from its place, with a table-cover under her head in guise of a pillow, Virginie was sleeping on a sofa, dressed, and covered with a shawl. Her lips, slightly opened, displayed her white teeth; her long eyelashes threw a dark shadow on her cheeks; and two braids of hair, that twined around her neck, fell on her clasped hands. She looked sad, and one could see that she had wept before going to sleep.

Verroy peeped in at the door, and regarded the young girl with a father and artist's eyes; the simplicity of the scene, Virginie's sadness and beauty, touched at once both his heart and his love of art; Masson, seeing him motionless, ventured to advance his head in the

same direction, and was struck by the sight. Marie, who had left them to go into the kitchen, returned just as a slight movement of the sleeper made one of her beautiful tresses fall to the ground. She drew Masson back by the skirt of his jacket.

"Will you have done?" said she to him, in a low voice; "should a man look at a young girl sleeping? You ought to feel that you steal something of her innocence from her."

"But," muttered Masson, bewildered by her speech, "Charles looked at her; and then she is so pretty."

"Charles is married! It is not the same thing. And then he was wrong to do so. Come away, both of you, my good friends."

She drew them outside, and shut the drawing-room door."

"What shall we do?" asked Verroy; "I am very hungry."

"You will take a cup of milk, and then return to La Ilenserie, where the lamps have been burning, and the windows open all night."

"So much the better," Masson said, philosophically, "the oil will thus have left no odor! There is nothing that smells worse."

While our friends were partaking of some excellent *café au lait*, seated before the kitchen table, Virginie appeared, timid, and with her eyes, that were still full of sleep, dazzled by the daylight. She rubbed her eyelids slowly with the back of her hand, and seemed only half-

awake; she had gathered up the tresses of her hair, however. She said good-morning to the young men, with a sweetness full of gratitude, and wished to busy herself in fulfilling the common duties of hospitality towards them; but Marie objected, and waited on them herself.

"But I have not sat up all night," Virginie tried to say.

Madame Verroy imposed silence on her by kissing her forehead, and made her sit down to her breakfast.

"Oh, Madame!" said the young girl, carrying Marie's hand to her lips, which she afterwards pressed to her eyes, full of grateful tears.

Marie held the young girl's head softly to her warm heart, that was void of maternal happiness, and Virginie felt at once that she had another friend who was as tender and as true as her godmother.

CHAPTER XX.

PRIVATE THEATRICALS.

THE sun penetrated the large, clean, bright kitchen in great floods of light, leaving its rays everywhere—on the brass saucepans, that were more brilliant than gold; on the pastry-moulds, that looked like the tiaras of Assyrian kings; on the enamel of porcelain, and the varnish of *faience*; on the small, soft rolls of bread that were gilded with the yolk of eggs; on the bright golden butter, and the vine-leaf forming its casket. The happiness of the new day seemed to be united to the returned health of the mistress of the pleasant place, and our guests, individually as well as collectively, were declaring they had never tasted such good *café au lait*, when the door opened, and the tragic nose and melodramatic eyes of Théodôre Lavenel entered.

He bowed to the assemblage with the air of a man who is not in the least astonished, and who knows exactly how things are happening; then, addressing Virginie alone, without being wanting in politeness for this reason to the others:

“Ah, my dear Mademoiselle!” he said, “how much anxiety you must have had! I heard of the accident last night just as I was going to bed; I did not take the liberty of coming here”—his ominous eye gave a look at Masson, as though to say to him, “Caught!”—“for I know too

well that a stranger is in the way on such occasions ; but I thought of your sorrow all night long, and I could not close my eyes."

Virginie, without knowing why, felt hurt at this speech. Lavenel would have done better not to have spoken of strangers in the presence of those who had just proved themselves so helpful. She was not used to the polite falsehoods of civilization ; she ignored everything about the great art of annoying people without giving them a right to be angry, but her natural frankness served her admirably.

"If it had not been for these gentlemen and for Madame Verroy, my poor godmother would probably have died on the road, Monsieur Lavenel," she replied, simply. "Think what cause we have then for blessing their presence."

Lavenel bowed to the right hand and to the left, with the air of a man who desires to be amiable, no matter what it may cost.

"And," continued he, with angelic sweetness, "will Madame and these gentlemen have the kindness to continue their good offices towards your poor godmother?"

"As long as they will be necessary, Monsieur Lavenel," Marie replied, curtly. "I beg your pardon, but I am going up-stairs."

With a very slight bow to the intruder, she disappeared on the stairway. Masson looked at Lavenel with curiosity—that odd creature, who resembled at the same time a sacristan, a bailiff's clerk—and a little, but very little—a small provincial tradesman, amused him extremely.

His comedian's instinct urged him to something malicious. He arranged his face so that it resembled the flour merchant's. He tied a foulard silk handkerchief, plaited in small folds, around his neck, making a rosette and two little ends in front; he drew his hair over his brow and on his temples, enlarged his waistcoat, drew up his suspenders, put his hands in the pockets of his jacket, that seemed suddenly to have become limp, and did it all with a series of movements that were so natural that no one had perceived him.

Lavenel, turning towards the young girl, after having bowed to Madame Verroy's back, found himself face to face with his prototype; by having buried his chin in his cravat, Masson had succeeded in imitating the flour merchant's profile. Utterly amazed—for the man he saw in front of him did not in the least resemble the one he had seen a short time before—Lavenel looked twice at the new face. Masson, who remained impassible, looked at him also with the same astonished air.

Then our disconcerted hero lifted his eyes upon Charles, who with great trouble kept serious. Happily for the sanity of Philomène's lover, the latter had not changed his appearance, and in order to avoid the consequences of the mystification, he hastened to ask some commonplace questions of the bewildered man.

While he was answering them, Masson had reassumed his usual appearance, and when Lavenel, who was much disturbed, turned to look at him again, he only found before him the young actor whom he knew. Incapable of explain-

ing this metamorphose to himself, the poor, astonished man became so confused in what he was saying, that he ended :

“ Well, Mademoiselle Virginie, I leave quite at your service.”

Masson hastened to open the door for him, and Lavenel drew aside a little, so as not to touch him in passing. I believe if a holy-water fount had been there, he would have sprinkled him with holy water ; but there was none at hand, and Lavenel found himself in the street without having exorcised any one.

“ What is the matter ? ” Virginie asked, seeing the two friends fall back in their chairs laughing convulsively, and trying to stifle their merriment in their handkerchiefs, for fear of disturbing Madame Aubier.

“ Masson— ” Verroy tried to say—“ Masson—showed him how he looks.”

“ And, as he is not handsome, it frightened him,” concluded the actor.

Virginie looked at them alternately, without understanding them.

Masson at once reproduced Lavenel's type with more perfection than the first time, for practice spoils nothing, and gave the young girl a bow so faithfully modelled after the unfortunate absent man's, that, in spite of her anxieties, she could not help laughing in her turn.

“ He takes me for the devil ! ” the young man said as he put his foulard handkerchief in his pocket and looked like himself once more.

“ Perhaps he is not wrong,” said Charles.

"In that case," Virginie said, smiling, "you would be a good devil, Monsieur."

Surprised and charmed, the young man answered her smile; the warm sympathy he had felt for her the day before rose from his heart to his brain like a breath of spring air, and he opened his lips to say something that he decided to keep to himself.

"Come!" said Charles, who had taken his overcoat; "come, we will go and put out our lamps if they are still burning. We will return soon to hear how things are going on; *au revoir*, Mademoiselle."

"*Au revoir*, and thanks," said Virginie, placing her brown hand in Verroy's. Masson extended his—open—towards her; she hesitated an instant, then put the ends of her fingers in it, and withdrew them at once, with a fugitive blush on her face.

"*À tantôt*," said Masson, almost in a low voice.

The door closed upon them very softly, so softly that they pushed it to see if it were shut; then they took the road towards their home. The air was strong and pure; the tranquil bay was deep blue; the cliffs of Aurigny shone white in the distance, illumined as they were by the rising sun. Our friends walked for a moment in silence, with the rapid and elastic step that the freshness of morning inspires.

When they had passed the last houses of the village, Charles remarked that his friend had a much more pre-occupied look than usual.

"Of what are you thinking?" said he to him softly, so as not to disturb his reverie rudely; those who dream

often know how harsh and unpleasant seems the voice that throws you suddenly into reality.

"How beautiful is innocence!" Masson answered in the same tone of voice. "In cities, my dear fellow, one has not an idea of it! The best brought-up little girls have all taken some small boy's arm!"

"Well?" said Charles, who could not follow the current of his friend's thoughts.

"Well! that Virginie, who has never touched a man's arm—it touches me, yes, Charles, it touches me! And then, too, when your wife scolded us, because we had looked at her asleep—your wife was right! She has a noble soul and an honest heart! She was right, *pardieu!*"

Surprised at this dithyrambic speech, Charles looked at his companion more attentively, and found that he wore a serious and impressed look that one rarely met on his face, and only on great occasions.

"What is the matter with you?" said he to him; "you do not seem in your ordinary frame of mind."

"What is the matter with me?" answered Masson, enthusiastically. "I am surprised at it myself; Charles, my friend, I believe I am in love! Oh! Virginie, the truly named!" exclaimed he, extending his arms towards Diélette, that shone brightly in the sand below their path, "it is your purity that has conquered me."

He was in joke, but the trembling of his lips showed a deep emotion.

"Let us sit down," said he to Verroy, pointing out a large stone to him. "I do not know what is the matter

with me; it seems to me I am drunk, and that in my eyes there is a sun that blinds me. A young girl, my friend, a real young girl! You do not know, you cannot know what that means to an actor! He plays every night with an *ingénue* forty years old, who leads a life that makes electric lights pale before it! We are taken to the theatre to play the part of small boys, in emotional plays, with little girls to whom the devil has nothing more to teach—children who reveal things to one that even we would not dare to think of; and behold, on a lovely July day, on the beach, on the cliffs or on the road to La Heuserie, one meets a young girl twenty years old, fascinatingly beautiful, made like a nymph, gentle, good and clever, and who knows nothing of life! nothing! Who has always walked alone in her pathways, who has only dreamed of her god-mother, and whose cheek is as virginal as her heart. Do you understand what I feel, Charles?”

“I understand it,” Verroy replied, gravely; “but you must not become lyrical, my friend. Do you want to marry her?”

“Ah! certainly I want to do so! I wish I were a millionaire, so I could cover that adorable creature with diamonds, and make her the queen of the world.”

“You would render her a very bad service. She is charming in her obscurity, but the full glare of public life would not suit her, perhaps. Besides, we have not got as far as that. Can you marry her now?”

“Ah!” sighed Masson, regretfully, “you break the wings of my dream! No, I cannot marry! One cannot marry with what I earn at the theatre.”

They set forth walking again, both of them in silence. After a second Masson said to his friend :

"You think it is not serious, because it has come too suddenly. Well! I declare to you, it is serious. Now, that I love her, all other women displease me! She possesses what none other can offer me—the charm of purity! Listen: a little while ago, when I held out my hand to her, and her fingers scarcely touched me, I felt it was the first time she had touched a man's hand! That woman shall be mine, only mine, or I will use all my resources in vain!"

"Wait a little, to see if it will last," continued Charles. "As soon as you have returned to the theatre; you will think no more about it."

"The theatre? Thank you! Ah! Velontine, Cold-Cream, and Champaka—the royal perfume—I am disgusted with you forever!"

"We will see!" said Verroy, unmoved. "If you still think of it three months hence, we will talk of it again."

"Ah! if I were rich!" muttered Masson, between his teeth. "But I do not even dare to wish to be rich! It would be wrong in me! Come, my dear fellow, meanwhile we will paint some water-colors, and try to sell them!"

"Paint as many as you like; my laziness is content in watching you; I imagine it is I who am working."

But instead of painting water-colors, Masson stretched himself out at length on a mat in the court-yard, and, with his face turned towards Heaven, dreamed all day of Virginie!

CHAPTER XXI.

SAD COOKING.

TOWARDS mid-day a sharp nose and yellow hair made their appearance at La Heuserie, accompanied by a basket containing some fresh fish, morning eggs, and a little roll of fresh butter. Masson awakened from his reverie, profited by the liberty that country life authorizes—to lean simply on his elbow and inspect the new-comer.

“I thought,” said the latter, approaching softly, “that probably you would have nothing to eat.”

“I do not know,” the actor answered, indifferently; “I believe Verroy is boiling some potatoes, for we could not find any knives: we are alone.”

“So I learned,” continued Philomène; “and I came to bring you something better than my cousin’s potatoes—be it said without wishing to blame him.”

“He is not clever at cooking,” said Masson, with the same indifference towards human things; “but it is all the same to me—I am not hungry.”

“I am not a good cook either, but I am going to try to awaken your appetite,” said Philomène, planted before him, and gazing at him with tender eyes. “You look very tired, Monsieur Masson; are you not ill?”

“I? No! a thousand thanks, dear Madame,” said the young man, finally deciding to rise. He stretched

himself without disturbing Philomène in her contemplation, and went towards the house, which she entered, close on his heels.

Charles had renounced endeavoring to make his potatoes boil; sadly seated in the large fire-place on a small stool that served Marie in the cabalistic operations that preceded their repasts, he watched the water evaporating insensibly in the great gulf black with soot, and saw with regret that the water would soon be completely vanished, and that the potatoes would not be boiled.

"What are you doing there, cousin?" asked Philomène, entering.

"I don't know, *ma foi!* nothing. I have been vainly endeavoring to procure some food. If you, at least," said he to Masson, "had come to help me, instead of dreaming of your love!"

Masson made a warning, angry sign to his imprudent friend, which the latter feigned not to perceive.

"He dreams of his love," continued he, "stretched out on his back, and I struggle to make this pot boil, without succeeding. You see, however, there is a large fire!"

"Yes, but your pot has no cover to it; I think I have come very opportunely."

"You always come opportunely," said Charles, graciously, who was softened at the thought that he was going to leave his post for a good place at the table. •

"You are very amiable, cousin! Here, Monsieur Masson, go and get some wine and cider, and return immediately—everything will be ready."

While the friends were in the cellar, Philomène upset the house so completely that in the twinkling of an eye the table was laid, and an hundred things were strewn about in all the corners; it was one of Madame Crèpin's peculiarities, that she overturned an entire kitchen to boil an egg.

However, when the two men found themselves seated before a good meal, a feeling of very natural gratitude made them show a thousand kindnesses to her who had rescued them.

"*Ma foi!* cousin," said Charles, when the coffee was smoking in the cups, "you have saved our lives! How one becomes spoiled, however! When I was a bachelor, how many times I was obliged to prepare my own food! Then, I knew how to go to work about it—but then years of marriage give one habits of laziness and comfort."

"One must be very unhappy as a bachelor, is it not so, Monsieur Masson?" asked Philomène, rejoiced at their praises and rejuvenated by her joy.

"Phew! that depends upon the way one looks at it, and also upon circumstances," the actor replied. "In certain cases one is unhappy—especially as regards cooking and linen—but outside of those two necessities of life, I do not see that one is so much to be pitied!"

Philomène modestly lowered her eyes over her cup, and added a morsel of sugar to her coffee, in which she had already put two.

"One is, however, much happier in married life," con-

tinued she, turning round the liquid with her little spoon ;
“I have had many sorrows in my life, but my happiest time was when the Captain was on shore, and I believe it must be the same with every woman who loves her husband.”

Masson had a great desire to ask her if the Captain also considered his happiest time that which he passed with her ; and if the good man had not been lying in the cemetery, the young actor would not have failed to ask her the question ; but he refrained through good-breeding, and contented himself with glancing at his friend from the corner of his eye ; and the latter having understood him, gave him a kick under the table, and they began talking about other things.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TALE OF A BASKET.

TOWARDS evening the young men returned to Diélette, accompanied by Philomène and her eternal little basket.

It is with baskets as with men: some have a clean and common air; others seem to despise the vulgarities of this world and only open themselves for exquisite things: choice fruits, Julien's cakes, Boissier's bonlons, ribbons of delicate colors, and perhaps for a dear, almost imperceptible little dog; others are work-day baskets, made for going to market and bringing sorrel home, while another will only hold feathered and four-footed game; others, finally, are small, ugly, and with their plaitings badly made, revealing to all passers-by their owners' secrets—and pray notice that the owners of such baskets would do far better if they were to keep their secrets to themselves!

Philomène's basket was of the latter kind. Charles could not abide it, and Marie, in order to relieve her husband of the sight of so ugly an object, had bought her cousin another one. But Madame Crépin did not like her new basket; she thought it *common*.

• It was made of fine black and white willow, and her frightful black basket she thought *distingué*.

"It possesses, in truth, a rare ugliness," Charles had

said. But he could not carry his point, and it was always the black basket that Philomène carried on her arm to and from Diélette.

Charles had been watching it since the morning, and had said to himself it should be the unlucky thing's last day; it was only necessary to make its tenacious owner forget it somewhere, and the rest would be a mere question of choice as to the means by which to make it disappear. But Philomène could have been caught without her purse sooner than without her basket, and our friends had the unhappiness, as they were leaving, of seeing Madame Crépin take it out of a dark corner, where probably it had not put itself, and with magnanimous calmness hang it triumphantly on her arm.

The afternoon was as lovely as that of the day before, but the sun had not yet set; and from time to time the young men stopped to admire the tints on the sands, the sea, and the distant islands, which looked like violet spots on an ocean of fire. Masson, who was under the influence of a new emotion, talked more and better than usual; and in spite of his wish to the contrary, a restrained lyrical tone lent to his conversation a something that was elevated and poetical, and which noble minds always surely feel.

The people adore poetical enthusiasms; they do not understand them—but in the music of syllables—of certain sonorous words, and caring little for their meaning, they find a subtle charm, which has been the cause of giving us many ridiculous songs and many bad novels.

Philomène listened in admiration ; she thought the young man who talked so well, with such noble, graceful gestures—especially handsome. Masson was what is called *un fils de famille*, that is to say, a man of the world, who has received a good education ; moreover, he was an actor, and represented the various types of character in the novels Philomène had read. In the superb scenic effect made by the beach and cliffs, with the evening sky as a back-curtain, Masson gave the illusion of the finest drama to the ignorant woman, and his passionate voice, which was the echo of all he hid within himself, awoke chords in her heart that had been for a long time dumb, and others, too, that had never vibrated before.

She had set down her basket in order to hear him, and with her hands crossed, she listened as though she were at a sermon—much better than at a sermon—when a movement of Charles made the object of his antipathy roll to the bottom of the cliff. The black basket turned over and over several times, and only stopped on the edge of the waves, that curled beneath, almost up to the rocks. The descent was only about thirty feet, and Charles regretted it was not three hundred, for Philomène, uttering a cry of sorrow, endeavored to run after the cherished object.

“Bah ! cousin, leave it alone !” said Verroy, drawing her back by her skirts. “It is not pretty, it is worth nothing. You have another, and if you care for that one, I will buy you one exactly like it.”

It was a fallacious promise, which he was quite determined never to keep.

"No, no!" exclaimed Philomène. "I want that one, and I will have it! My husband bought it for me at Bordeaux."

"They make very ugly baskets at Bordeaux, then," said Charles; but Masson, who was touched by Philomène's hazardous efforts to descend the cliff, was already at the bottom of it, and brought back the precious treasure to its owner, who immediately expressed her great joy and gratitude to him.

"I have no luck," sighed Charles; "but Masson shall pay me for this!"

"What?" asked the latter.

"Nothing, my friend. You are a hero, and I admire you."

Madame Aubier was much better, and Marie was able to confide her, without anxiety, to Virginie's care. The three friends returned to La Heuserie, while Philomène went to her home. •

She opened the door carefully, and, like a cat that is afraid of burning itself, ventured in the darkness as far as the fireplace; there she procured herself a light, then she placed her basket on the table, and sitting down opposite, began to look at it.

The Captain had, in effect, bought the ugly thing at Bordeaux to hold some unexpected purchase he had made, and brought it back with him, as one brings home such chance acquisitions, because an ill-advised feeling of economy leads us to encumber ourselves with useless, disagreeable things, simply in order not to throw them

away when once we have paid for them. With her usual want of taste, Philomène found it useful and pretty, and from that time would have no other. Like the legendary knife of a certain Jeannot, who has remained unknown, it had changed its handle and cover many times, and in its successive metamorphoses had become dearer and more dear to Philomène. The Captain's souvenir returned of itself in the presence of the basket, and his widow accorded him an honorable mention in her memory. Then, by a mysterious transition—and even by no transition at all—she began thinking of Masson, and a slight emotion made her heart tremble. With what grace had he descended the cliff, and with what kindness had he brought her back the basket, because she cared for it! Thus thinking, Philomène mentally threw a stone at her cousin Charles, who had shown such disdainful indifference to her feelings in that affair. What would she have said, good heavens! had she known the active part he had taken in the event? But she was always doomed to ignorance on this point.

Yes, Masson was very kind—perfectly charming! Philomène, with her eyes still fixed upon the object that was the cause of so many dreams, recalled one by one her knight's features. His complexion, his eyes, and his nose were the subjects of a retrospective investigation as minute as that of a council of revision, and Madame Crépin ended by saying to herself that the young man was very nice—very nice, indeed! And then, he was so amusing! *Mon Dieu!* how amusing he was!

She ignored, however, his talent for imitating Theodore Lavenel; but other drolleries were never wanting in his conversation, and Philomène, who did not always understand him, only admired him the more. Ah! if Lavenel only had a character like that, instead of the cross disposition nature had allotted to him in a moment of ill-humor! She could have been very happy with a man with such a character; that was what she wanted. Winter evenings are so long, when people have nothing pleasant to say to each other. A husband who can tell stories, that is a happiness! The Captain used to tell stories, which was natural—he had travelled so much.

But Masson's stories were very amusing—especially so, because Philomène found an individual flavor in them; they introduced her into a new, fantastic world, wherein everything seemed extraordinary to her. How gay life would be with that man!

Here Philomène heaved a great sigh.

Her thoughts took another turn. She was going to Paris: this was interesting. Paris, in itself, did not mean much to her; it was, after all, only a city like other cities—a few houses more or less, was the only difference. And then, she detested Paris; Parisians have a way of thinking everything is better done and nicer there, than in the provinces; now, there is not a being endowed with reason who does not know the contrary!

First, perhaps she might recover her money; and then—and then, she would see Masson. Decidedly, she loved him very much—and that was very natural! And more-

over, he resembled the Captain prodigiously! All widows, whose hearts begin to beat again, find that the object of their flame resembles their defunct husband; it is a well-known thing.

Philomène's candle was not of the best quality, and it was running sadly down in its socket, when the lady remembered she had not supped. To sup alone! how dull it was! She went towards the sideboard in a melancholy way, took a piece of bread and butter, and inflicted this frugal repast upon herself as though it had been a penance.

Not that she repented of her thoughts. Was she not as free as air? But why had she been so stupid as to have allowed Lavenel to circumvent her? She was quite decided not to marry him, of course, but it was too much to have given him the right to say so. It was true this unscrupulous man had betrayed her; it was agreed they should say nothing to any one, and he had spoken of it to everybody. His mother and himself might deny it as much as they pleased, but as Philomène had said nothing, therefore it was they who had tattled. But so much the worse for them! They would only be the more ashamed, when she should declare they had invented it all; for, remember, there had been no witnesses.

How ugly Lavenel was! The more she saw him, the more did she find him disagreeable. And then, what was this habit he had taken of going to Madame Aubier's on all occasions? Did he mean to take up his summer quarters there? There was nothing to call him to that

house, and Madame Crépin did not intend he should be seen there so often. It was true, since she had given him her promise, he had not come, perhaps, three times to her house, and he never left the one opposite. She would snub him as he deserved—in anticipation of what he would inherit.

Here Philomène began to laugh in the three stray hairs that ornamented her chin and served her for a beard, as she thought of the anticipated inheritance that would never come to anything: it was an inheritance *en Espagne*.

This thought made her so happy that she went to bed with a novel of Ducray Dumesnil's, that she put under her pillow at the end of ten minutes so she could find it there in the morning, for she was very fond of reading in bed early in the morning, before she began her day.

CHAPTER XXIII.

INDECISION.

"I AM recalled!" said Masson, sadly, as he passed Charles a letter he had just received.

"Oh! already!" exclaimed the husband and wife.

"Alas! my friends! I have been here more than a month, and have overstayed the limit of my vacation. I cannot complain. It is very hard, however, to leave when I am so happy!"

"It is very hard to have you go!" said Marie.

"It is not you whom I pity," Masson answered, after a short silence. "You remain here together; while I go off, the devil knows where, and I take nothing away with me to console me."

"Does that still last?" asked Charles in a low voice, for the inevitable Philomène was wandering somewhere about in the house.

"I was just saying to myself that it will always last."

Charles meditated for an instant.

"Well," said he, "return to your surroundings, to your occupations. In six weeks we will be at Paris; if you are still of the same mind, we will speak of it again."

"Speak of it again? What would be the use of it? Would a provincial endowed with reason give his daughter to me? Would that kind Madame Aubier,

who loves me with all her heart, now that she is cured of her illness, give her godchild to me? I have neither fortune nor position to offer her. And even were all those obstacles overcome, could I take that good, charming child behind the scenes in the evening, before the play began? And then I would be obliged to leave her alone all day while I rehearsed, and at night when I acted. No! it is impossible, perfectly impossible! If I only had four or five thousand francs income, I would come and settle here; I have seen some exquisite sites along the coast and inland; I would raise cabbages, as I told you, and I would never think of my theatrical life again. I would have done better to have entered the Seminary, after all, on my word of honor!"

Quite discouraged, he let his arms fall on the table, and laid his head upon them.

"Come," said Charles; "you must not get discouraged like that! All is not lost! And, besides, you always have La Trappe as a last resource. Answer me honestly: have you ever spoken to Virginie about what you feel for her?"

Masson arose suddenly.

"For whom do you take me?" said he, energetically. "That child's greatest charm is her innocence; do you imagine I would wish to take from her the smallest part of that which forms her moral and physical beauty? No, certainly, I have never said anything to her; I will never say anything since I cannot ask her to be my wife."

Marie held out her hand over the table to the young

actor, who kissed it with the affection and respect with which his friend's wife had inspired him for many years. Philomène, who always came in at the proper moment, witnessed this act of deference and was much astonished at it; such habits had not yet penetrated as far as Diélette. What surprised her the most was Charles' calmness, who had seen the effusion; the charitable woman's eyes glanced alternately from one to the other, until her cousin, wishing to put an end to her perplexity, said to her :

"Masson is going to leave us."

"Ah!" said Madame Crépin, who felt such a violent shock overcome her, that she was obliged to lean against the near wall to keep from tottering. "Ah! so suddenly? without any warning?"

"I was not warned that I should be recalled, dear Madame," answered Masson, endeavoring to appear gay. "I leave to-morrow at daybreak. What annoys me," said he to Charles, "is being obliged to disturb you so early; but don't trouble yourself about me; I will not need any breakfast—"

"You can breakfast at my house," Philomène hastily said. "By leaving here at six o'clock you will be at Diélette at half-past six; the diligence does not leave before seven. You will have time to take a frugal repast such as I can offer you."

"But," said Masson, "I am afraid of disturbing you, and yet—"

"Accept," said Marie, "that is the best arrangement, for I could not get any milk early enough to give you any breakfast. Philomène has had an excellent idea!"

This was all so simple that the arrangement was made. After dinner, Masson said he was going to bid Madame Aubier good-bye that afternoon, in order not to awaken her the next morning.

"Do you wish me to go with you?" asked Charles, seeing him take his hat.

"No, my friend, thanks; excuse me, if I confess to you that I would prefer your wife's society."

Philomène opened her eyes wider still, but Marie was at once ready, and she saw them both disappear under the trees in the avenue. She then turned to Charles to say something disagreeable to him, but the latter was so profoundly absorbed in his journal, that it would have been necessary to have asked him a direct question to draw him from it. Madame Crépin preferred not to run that risk, and set forth wandering about everywhere, within and without the house.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SORREL AND TREFOIL.

“DEAR Madame,” said Masson, when they were beyond hearing distance, “you will find me very absurd, but really I have a great desire to live a country life. Do you believe if I offered myself to father Beuron, as a farm-servant, I would have any chance, after seven years, of winning Virginie according to the patriarchal custom of the Hebrews?”

Marie could not help laughing.

“Father Beuron would probably find you a very bad farm-servant,” she answered; “and he will have married his daughter before seven years.”

Masson sighed; which was, however, rarely his habit—but as he doubtless would have been the first to affirm, love changes the character.

“To what saint shall I resort, then?” said he, in a melancholy tone.

“To Saint Patience: it is the one whose intervention is generally the most efficacious.”

“And, meanwhile, as you say, father Beuron will have married his daughter. Ah! if I had only hoarded up a few *sous*! If I had put in the foot of a woollen stocking all I have spent with—! From to-day I am going to settle down and practise economy; you will see what a savings

bank we will break on New Year's day. It will be my present to myself!"

"And you will hurry to spend it all in buying cigars, or a Japanese cabinet, or a little clay statuette—"

"No! I will begin to hoard so as to be worthy of marrying Virginie some day!"

"Is it serious, then?"

"Very serious."

Marie reflected a moment.

"I do not say that it is an absurd idea," she then continued; "certainly, I was only a country girl at the time of my marriage, infinitely less civilized than Virginie, and still Charles and I have been very happy!"

"Well, you see!"

"The misfortune is," continued the young woman, "that Mademoiselle Beuron has some little fortune—"

"She?" exclaimed Masson, stopping suddenly.

"Why, yes! Did you not know it?"

"She has some fortune! Good-bye, then, to my dream! I hoped she was poor. I said to myself, that the modest competency I will have some day, would give her pleasures she now ignores. But if she has some fortune, I am farther off from her than ever!"

He had so despairing a look, that Madame Verroy took his arm, in order to bring him back to himself, and also a little to console him.

"Come!" she said to him, "Charles is right. Try to return to the ordinary ways of your tastes and habits. Probably you will think no more of Diélette and its

inhabitants in a month hence. If your fancy holds good, we will talk over it again."

"Will you help me?" said Masson, in his most persuasive voice.

"I don't know. We will talk about it again. That is all I can promise you."

"Thank you, all the same! What a misfortune!—*Mon Dieu!* what a misfortune that she should be rich!"

"I do not see that it is an irremediable misfortune," said Marie, finally grown a little impatient with this discouragement. "One still has at least the resource of being able to ruin one's self, or to ruin one's wife! It seems to me that is within every one's compass!"

"On what, then, would you have us live?" the young man continued, pitifully.

"That is a *me* that seems to me nicely placed," said Marie. "Fortunately, here are the houses full of attentive ears, or else you would find some other reason for which to be doleful."

Madame Aubier, who had almost entirely recovered from her attack, was struck with consternation on hearing of Masson's proximate departure.

"What! you are going away?" said she. "And I, who imagined you would always remain here! And you, also—will you go away, too?" added the old lady, turning towards Marie. "You will go away never to return here again, like him. It is really foolish to attach one's self to people in this way; you only lay up sorrow for yourself—I had grown so fond of you all! And, then, you have been so kind to me, and to the little one! Where is she?"

Virginie appeared at the garden gate, with a handful of sorrel and trefoil in her half-lifted apron, and smiled at the visitors with a shade of embarrassment.

"Imagine!" said her godmother to her, "here is Monsieur Masson, who is going away!"

The sorrel and the trefoil descended gently down her apron and fell on the ground, and the young girl's rosy cheeks turned white with a pallor that gradually overspread all her face. Masson arose hurriedly to gather up the green leaves strewn over the granite threshold. Virginie leaned half over to prevent him, but a sudden weakness benumbed her members, and she was obliged to renounce the effort she had endeavored to make. She held her apron open, in which the young man replaced the green herbs, without hastening much, however. They did not speak to each other—they did not touch each other; and yet so many eloquent things were exchanged between them, while, with one knee on the ground, he picked up the prosaic sorrel, that Madame Aubier became quite serious.

"What?" said she, turning suddenly towards Marie.

The latter replied by a slight sign with her head. Falsehood was not in her way, and Madame Aubier had every right to know about what concerned her adopted child so closely. The old lady became grave, and continued looking at the pair on whom a bright summer sun was shining.

When the last bit of trefoil had joined the others in Virginie's apron, Masson, leaning on his knee in order to raise himself, lifted his eyes towards the young girl.

It mattered little to him that they saw him ; he did not seek to make a mystery of his honest feelings. She read in his look, doubtless, all that he meant to put in it ; for, with a slightly oppressed voice, she answered :

“Thank you, Monsieur.”

Then she passed slowly before him without looking at him ; but her gown brushed the young man's bended knee, and she blushed. With the same quiet step, as though she were overwhelmed, she crossed the room and went into the kitchen, of which she shut the door. When she was alone, she shook out the sorrel mechanically on the table ; then she threw her apron over her head and began to weep, not knowing why.

Masson had arisen. He approached the old lady, and sitting opposite to her, took both her hands in his. In a few short and hurried words, he told her all his past and present life, his position, his hopes, of the new feeling that had overcome him, and which threatened to transform all his existence. He said he was ready to do anything that was asked of him, provided the young girl would be the reward of his labors.

“And,” he added, “I love her because she is as innocent and pure as her name ! It is not for her beauty, great as it is ; it is not for her fortune—I was unaware that she possessed any ; it is not for her grace and her affection for you, which has touched me above all : it is the virginal charm of her whole self ; it is her candor ; it is—”

He stopped, feeling he could not define what had moved him. It was so æthereal, so ideal an impression,

that it defied words, and could not be uttered in speech; but Madame Aubier understood it, and approved it with a sign of her head.

"Then, have you never said anything to her?" she asked, with so authoritative a manner that it might have seemed surprising in the old, common-place woman, did not the dignity of maternal feeling ennoble all that it approaches.

"How could I have spoken to her?" he answered, warmly; "it would have been taking something away from her charm. Here, before you, just now, I was on the point of so doing, and I did not dare to do it."

Madame Aubier remained silent.

"And you belong to the theatre?" she finally said. "It is astonishing! I thought you were an artist, and painted water-color drawings?"

"That, dear Madame, is a pleasure; the theatre is my occupation, and Heaven knows I would willingly change it for another."

"It is very strange," the old lady continued, "that it should be Virginie's innocence that has fascinated you! I should have thought that, in the life you lead, you would care no longer for such things!"

"Madame Verroy will explain that to you," Masson answered; "it would be too difficult to relate in so short a time. Say one kind word to me, Madame Aubier, though it may only be in return for my frankness."

"You are an honest man. I say so to you from my heart; you are a good fellow, and I feel a great deal of

friendship for you—all the more since a moment or two ago, and especially because I did not believe my old heart capable of feeling so much for a new acquaintance. In growing old, you see, Monsieur Masson, one mistrusts new faces; but, I do not know why, every one who comes from that house"—she pointed to Marie—"inspires me with an unlimited confidence."

"I will not make you repent of it," said Masson, much overcome; "but about her, dear Madame, about her?"

"Ah, my friend, she does not belong to me! And, then, what guarantees can you offer her family? I do not know, I would ask nothing better, but—it must be seen into; you must wait. And suppose she should not wish to have you?"

Masson, who was bewildered for a moment, suddenly regained his courage.

"She? Dear Madame, if, after the pain she felt just now, Virginie could love any other man than myself, she would no longer be the divine creature I have dreamed her, and I would be cured of my love at once."

He smiled in a chivalric manner, and seemed so certain of his lady's honor, that the two women exchanged a glance, and smiled also.

"I promise you," said the old lady, "to do nothing to harm you. For the present, ask nothing more of me; there are too many things to be weighed and reflected upon, for me to be able sincerely to promise you more."

"I understand and thank you," said the young man, rising. "It was already a great kindness on your part not

to have turned me out of doors, when you learned that I played at the theatre. But I do hold to it, you know! I will enter some office, where I can scribble on paper as uselessly as any other one, provided only you will not ask me to return to the Seminary."

His gayety and his courage had returned to him at the same time. He threw a glance towards the kitchen-door, and Madame Aubier understood it.

"Virginie," said she, in a loud voice, "what are you doing?"

"I am preparing the soup, godmother," answered the young girl's voice, a little veiled by her recent tears.

The three friends looked at each other; the voice opened new horizons for Masson's hopes.

"Can you come and say good-bye to Monsieur Masson, who leaves for Paris to-morrow morning?"

The response was long in coming; evidently the young girl did not dare to confront her guest's looks, with her sad face, and her red eyes.

"Excuse me, godmother, I cannot," she at last answered, in a feeble voice, and as if with regret.

"I adore her," said Masson, in a low tone, carrying the old lady's hand to his lips; "I esteem her more and more for her modesty and her angelic timidity. She has been weeping—she is weeping still. She loves me, Madame Aubier, no matter what you may say. She loves me, and does not dare to see me again, since she knows I love her. Tell her—No! you do not wish to tell her anything? She will know it without any one's speaking of it to her. She will know that I carry away her image with

me, to preserve me from the follies of my life; to teach me that one may be perfectly good and honest without having ever learned it in books. She will know, above all, that unless I was determined to overcome all things in order to obtain her, I would not have made her precious tears flow—unless I were a miserable wretch, and I am not that, Madame Aubier!”

The old lady took his head in her hands, and kissed him on his brow with the warmth of a loving grandmother; then she pushed him aside at once.

“Go away!” said she, “go away! You will make me lose my good sense—go! Madame Verroy will write to you. May the good God keep you!”

Masson left at once. Marie rejoined him almost immediately; she had only taken time to exchange two words with Madame Aubier, and those two words were encouraging for the young man. They took the road towards La Heuserie without speaking to one another. Each of them was overcome by deep feeling—the young girl’s soul seemed to float above them, and to inspire them with an almost sacred respect.

“How all this changes a man!” said Masson, at length, following the thread of his thoughts. “I did well to come here. I go away better than I came. I owe to you the happiness and the honor of my life.”

“Not to us!” said Marie, smiling.

“To you! It is the example of your life with Charles, that has inspired me with serious thoughts; be sure, in many cases, the feelings one experiences are the effect of one’s surroundings. To have changed me like this, it

needed this simple life, devoid of all artificial element; it needed the sight of your happiness and your domestic peace; and then this superb sea, this enchanting country, your little modest, almost poor house, these honest people, free from all artifice—I might have seen Virginie at your house at Paris, and probably I would not have noticed her, and certainly not loved her. But here it is the Age of Gold—every one is good here!”

“Excepting Philomène,” said Charles’ voice, who had come to meet them, and whom they had not seen. “Imagine,” said he to Masson, “that she is afraid you are in love with my wife!”

Our three friends burst out laughing together.

“Do you think she believes it?” Masson asked.

“She pretends to believe it, at least, perhaps in order to make me think so. Since you left, she has not kept still, in any place; she wandered around with anxious eyes, going from the house to the gate, and returning to me with the look of a poodle who is begging to have a bit of wood thrown in the water for him to bring back. She was mad to come and meet you; but I did not wish to give her that pleasure; she would only have found you conspiring; my misfortune would have been sure. Well! and your affairs, Masson?”

“I adore her!” the young man answered.

They were so merry that this answer made them all three laugh, and Philomène was heartbroken at the echo of their gayety, which reached her in the chimney corner whither she had gone to keep her grief warm.

CHAPTER XXV.

NEW ASPIRATIONS.

THE sun, hidden by the high hills, had not yet illuminated the fine sand of the beach when Masson left La Heuserie; he set forth with a joyful step; at a turning in the road he bade good-bye with his hand to the hospitable house that was still asleep, and descended towards the river's bank.

He left without feeling sad; since the previous day a new man had been born in him, one more resolute, more calm, more worthy also. After the ten or fifteen years he had passed in the carelessness of a life that was but little severe, he hailed with joy the aurora of a new existence, and bent his neck, that had hitherto been rebellious, under the yoke of responsibilities with a willing heart. The thought of working, of saving, of living as a serious man, far from frightening him, held a large part in the love with which the young provincial girl had inspired him; such conversions do not take place in a day's time, unless the ground has been prepared beforehand, and if Masson had not been weary for a long time with an ill-assorted life that had no future, he would not have been so strongly impressed by the charms of a simple and almost austere existence.

The young actor had just sufficient talent not to be

willing to renounce theatrical life, and yet not enough ever to make an illustrious name; nothing was more natural therefore, than that some day he should become disgusted with an existence without renown, or any future; but the day might still have been distant, if chance had not thrown him in that out-of-the-way country, where civilization penetrates but very slowly, and where everything has retained a perfume of primitive simplicity.

He knocked at Philomène's door in a preoccupied way, and with a look of a man who accomplishes a duty; Madame Crépin opened it for him herself with her most gracious smile.

"You were not in a hurry to leave," she said. "You will scarcely have time to take a cup of milk; they are already harnessing the horses to the carriage; but it is not yet loaded: sit down."

Masson seated himself with the air of a half-awakened man, who still dreams. Philomène's home was not characterized to call him back to reality, for the strange objects with which it was peopled made one think of certain nightmares that have been illustrated by fantastic painters. His breakfast was very real, however; and soon the noise of wheels completely restored him to the possession of his faculties. He rose to leave.

"No, no," said Madame Crépin, retaining him with a gesture; "the carriage has only come to be loaded near here, but they will come to tell you when it is ready; I have arranged it with the driver."

"I thank you," said Masson, making a violent effort to

shake off his lethargy, and to appear amiable. "You think of everything."

Madame Crépin smiled with a feeling of superiority; indeed, she had thought of everything! She had thought of asking Masson to her house in order to annoy, at once, both Lavenel, who would be jealous, and Madame Aubier, who had taken possession of the young man in a truly unseemly manner! They would all plainly see in Diélette that the Parisians found her nice enough to accept her hospitality whenever it pleased her to offer it!

"I think I shall soon go to Paris," Philomène said, in a careless way, leaning on her elbows on one side of the table; "we will doubtless have a chance of seeing each other again there."

"Certainly!" replied Masson, who was still preoccupied. He was thinking of La Heuserie, and said to himself that at that very minute the sun must be shining in a little window that he knew well in his room, that was, alas! now empty. "If you are desirous of going to the theatre ever, I will have some tickets for you, dear Madame."

"I do not refuse, Monsieur Masson; you are very kind. Then in a month we shall meet again."

"I shall be charmed to do so; you are truly very kind to have disturbed yourself for me so early—"

"Nothing is a trouble when it is a question of persons one likes and esteems," the widow answered, in an affable tone.

Masson bowed in silence; what should he reply? However the necessity of saying something urged itself so

imperiously upon him, that he was obliged to immolate himself.

"I sincerely hope that if you may have need of anything whatever, in which my services can be of use to you, that you will apply to me, dear Madame," he said; "I have some leisure time; I will be entirely at your disposition."

"I thank you, Monsieur. I promise to remember your friendly offer when the chance occurs!" said the widow, with her grandest air. She felt herself a woman of the world at that moment.

Masson thought the situation was dragging on to great lengths, when happily the driver came and gave, most unceremoniously, a great knock with his fist on the door.

"Where is the Paris gentleman?" said he. "I saw him pass by a little while ago; is he with you?"

"Here I am!" said Masson, hastening to gather up his luggage. He was just leaving the threshold when he discovered Philomène's right cheek before him; he did his duty, and deposited a country-like kiss on the obstacle. To his surprise, the left cheek presented itself in turn; he offered it an equal sacrifice, bowed, and found himself in the street with a certain feeling of relief.

The carriage was waiting for him, and he was just getting into it when Madame Aubier's door opened, and Virginie appeared on the threshold; leaving the door ajar, she quickly crossed the square, and approached Masson, with her face covered with blushes, but without any embarrassment, feigned or real.

"My godmother does not wish you to leave without a word of friendship from her," she said, in a low voice; "she sent me to you to tell you she wished you all the happiness you deserve!"

"She told you to tell me that?" asked Masson, more overcome than the young girl herself.

"Those were her words, Monsieur; and I repeat them to you as she said them to me."

"Your godmother is the best of women, and you—you are a good and kind young girl. Do not forget me, Mademoiselle!"

"No," murmured Virginie, in a very low voice. "No, I will not forget you!"

Philomène at her doorway looked at them with gleaming eyes. Masson had the courage to cut short a conversation that he would have given much to have been able to prolong. He held out his hand to Virginie, who placed her own in it, without trembling this time, however.

"People kiss each other in the country," said he to her; "but I do not wish to kiss you, there are too many eyes looking at us. If any one ever says anything bad to you about me, do not believe it; do not believe anything against me—I—I—!"

He let fall Virginie's hand, and got into the carriage without daring to look at her. She returned to the house with her easy, calm step; and the door closed upon her, while the carriage started off. But just as it was going to turn the corner, he saw the curtain of Madame Aubier's

window raise, and the young girl's face appeared by the side of the old lady's. He made them a respectful bow, which Philomène took as an answer to a good-bye she was telegraphing him with her handkerchief; and of that sojourn which was to make a new man of him, nothing more remained to Masson save the landscape before him, and a box filled with water-colored drawings.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PLAN FOR THE FUTURE.

“ONE feels all upset since Masson has left us; is it not true?” Charles asked his wife one day when it rained. “When shall we leave?”

“When you like, dear. To-morrow, if it would give you pleasure!”

“Not to-morrow, but let us see!” He counted on his fingers, and after rather a complicated mental calculation, he ended by finding a solution. “One can return to Paris with propriety on the twenty-fifth of August?”

“Certainly.”

“Well, we will return there on the thirtieth; that will give us about ten days more here, which is longer than I need for finishing my work.”

“And for me, to arrange my little plots with Madame Aubier. You would never suspect what is going on! Lavenel is paying attention to Virginie!”

“Lavenel? I thought he was morally settled under Philomène’s law! Has he not been in love with her for sixty years?”

“I thought so, too, but Madame Aubier confided to me, under the seal of secrecy, that he goes to her house every day, while Philomène is here, and the days she does not come he takes great care not to appear there. That gives one food for thought!”

"Ah! my dear, let others think what they like! What does it matter to us? I believe, *ma foi*, that one ends by liking gossip just from listening to it!"

Marie went and laid her two hands on her husband's shoulders.

"And if Virginie loves Masson, must a creature like Theodore Lavenel be allowed to marry her?"

"Never in the world! I will oppose it formally! But *does* she love Masson?"

"She says nothing about it, and will never say anything; she is one of the kind who die of grief without opening their mouths, but her godmother is sure she loves our friend."

"Poor little one!" sighed Charles. "I presume in fifteen days he will have forgotten her—"

"My dear, you are cruel!"

"Well, let us say three weeks, then! However that may be, do you want a wise bit of counsel that will cost you nothing? Philomène is coming with us, is she not?"

"Yes."

"Never speak either to Madame Crépin or before her of Masson, or Virginie, or Lavenel, either collectively or separately. If she speaks to you of them, turn your tongue in your mouth seventy times seven times, before answering her; be prudent, like King Solomon."

"What do you suspect? You frighten me."

"I suspect nothing—ground failing me on which to build my suppositions—but I foresee that some day there

will be a collision between those four persons, and if we wish to keep our friends, we must have our eyes open and not allow ourselves to be circumvented."

"By whom?"

"By Philomène. Do you wish to know what I think of her?"

"Certainly!"

"Well, I cannot abide her!"

Marie reflected for a few seconds.

"Do you wish me to get rid of her; under some pretext?" she said.

"No, indeed! First, we owe her for the rent of this house, and since she will not let us pay her for it, we must do something to please her—in parenthesis, this is a lease that will cost us dearer than one at Trouville—and then, she interests me, this consoled Arthemisia! She is not like everybody else. I am curious to see how it all will end!"

"And then you say, you do not care for gossiping!" said Marie, laughing. "La Fontaine was right:

"Je connais même sur ce point

Bon nombre d'hommes qui sont femmes!"

Nevertheless, I will go and pack our trunks."

"Good luck, and much pleasure may you have," Charles replied, taking up his pen.

CHAPTER XXVII. '

A QUESTION OF TOILETTE.

ON a fine evening in the beginning of September, in dust-covered Paris, that was brilliant with gas, and swarming with people, M^{onsieur} and M^{adame} Verroy, accompanied by Philomène and a maid picked up on the road, reached their home. The pleasant house, which this happy pair had chosen for their nest, had never before seen so many strange packages and eccentric things coupled together as it then witnessed. People who seldom travel have an especial gift for tying things together that are the least calculated to be united; though they may bind the ephemeral unions solidly in packages rolled up in newspapers, they succeed only in producing anti-geometrical forms, that are misshapen, incommodious, and utterly incapable of being stowed anywhere in the world, and which at some moment invariably fall, collectively or separately, on one's head from the net-work supporting them in the railway compartment, or else roll between one's legs under the seat.

Philomène, besides an immense and very heavy trunk that was full of useless things, which she would never even unfold during her visit, had put the excess of her luggage in game-baskets of different sizes. The Parisian who, in spite of his reputation for cunningness, is simple-minded,

imagines that game-baskets are only made to hold oysters, game, plants with their clods of earth about them—in a word, things that cannot be put in a close receptacle: it is erroneous! the people of Normandy use game-baskets for carrying all sorts of things; which might explain why Marie, who was present at the unpacking of her cousin's things, saw issue from several of these receptacles, underclothes, a shawl, two pairs of boots, slippers, a comb, a mass-book, a casket, a heavy *lorgnette*, which was, truth to tell, nothing less than the Captain's marine-glass, an indefinite number of stockings, and many other things too long to enumerate.

"What have you got in your trunk?" asked Marie, urged to this indiscreet question from the oddity of this method of transportation.

"My clothes, my dear!" Philomène replied, with an offended air.

"Ah! very well. I did not know you were so well provided with things of every description!"

Philomène smiled with a delighted look.

"I am not quite without resources," said she, "although, in reality, I am in a very precarious position as far as money is concerned. My late husband never let me want for anything, and I have enough with which to dress myself."

She only spoke too truthfully. The room Madame Verroy had allotted to her cousin was soon full to overflowing with all the things which Philomène deemed necessary for her to have for passing a month at Paris. The closets being filled, they were obliged to hang up

portmanteaux, and even these extended into the hall so numerous, that the next day Charles, on leaving his room, got his nose among Madame Crépin's skirts, that were so strongly impregnated with pepper, tobacco, vety-ver, and other suffocating substances, that he sneezed for more than half an hour without being able to stop.

"It is a false cold, cousin," Philomène said to him when she heard of the incident; "it happens to me twice a year—when I pack up my winter things, and when I unpack them; but it does not last as long as a real cold."

"Thank heaven!" the young man replied, "you encourage me, cousin! But you ought to have unpacked your things at Diélette a good two weeks before coming here!"

Philomène put on her offended look, and Marie was obliged to use at least one game-basketful of consoling words before she could win back a smile to her heartbroken visage.

When peace was re-established, Madame Crépin asked a consultation with her cousin, relative to the woollen gowns that had caused the unfortunate nasal irritation at the Verroys'. The examination proved that nothing could be of any use, and the widow, looking more hurt than ever, sat down opposite her old clothes, letting her arms fall in a despairing manner.

"What shall I do?" she said, in a voice full of tears. "I am not rich enough to have some dresses made that I shall only wear for a month; for you know, Marie, when I return home, I cannot put on flounced dresses and all

the rest of it. I am going to return, that is all ; it seems to me the only thing left to do !”

Her distress touched Marie's heart, who at once hunted in her wardrobe, whence she disinterred a black cashmere dress that was simple enough for Madame Crépin to wear, and sufficiently modern not to make the passers-by in the street turn round to look at it.

She brought Philomène this *opima spolia* of a new kind, had a dressmaker fit it to her, and for the first time in her life, attaining and going beyond her boldest dreams at once, the dear soul found herself in the folds of a dress with a train.

A dress with a train ! Philomène Crépin in a dress with a train ! The inhabitants of Diélette would all surely have laughed had they been allowed to contemplate the sight, for in no country more than in Normandy does dress distinctly define the line of demarcation between the different classes, and a more than ordinary courage or boldness is necessary to overstep it.

Philomène did not feel herself quite at her ease at the thought that she was wearing a dress with a train, just like a fashionable woman ; she thought, so, at least, not seeing herself in the glass, and besides, she was quite incapable of appreciating the difference there is in the way of dragging or letting one's skirt flow behind one.

This unhappy train was the cause of much grief to the little maid ; it could not be discovered through what miraculous means the sweepings that had been gathered up by daybreak, were to be found everywhere about at

breakfast-time. Charles, who was annoyed by the daily repetition of this fact, ended, one morning, by scolding the poor maid severely, who took all the saints to witness in regard to the conscientious manner in which she fulfilled her daily task.

"It must be myself, cousin," said Philomène, coming in like a *Deus ex machinâ*; "I gather them up with the train of my dress as I walk about in the apartment in the morning, while she is doing up the rooms."

"You should carry your train in your hand!" grumbled Charles, turning his back on her.

"Why do you dress yourself so early in the morning?" Marie asked, endeavoring to soften her husband's rude frankness. "I don't wear such long dresses before twelve o'clock."

"I am well aware that I know nothing about city customs," Philomène answered immediately; "a poor country-woman like myself cannot aspire to fine manners; pardon, therefore, the stupidities I may commit here. But, my dear friend, do you not remember that it was yourself who forbade me wearing my country clothes here, so that I should not look ridiculous when people came to see you? Persons come to see your husband a long time before eleven o'clock; must I then appear ridiculous?"

Renouncing trying to make any ideas enter so rebellious a mind, Marie answered:

"Do as you like!"

And Philomène continued dragging into all the corners the perverse sweepings, that were determined not to remain still.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A VISIT TO THE THEATRE.

MASSON appeared during these domestic agitations; he went there almost every day, before or after breakfast, remained an hour, and left—rested, graver and better than ever. He strictly conformed to the programme he had traced out for himself at Diçlette, and lived not like an anchorite, but as a man whose dream is elsewhere than in the life of the Boulevards. As far as appearances were concerned, nothing was changed. He might be seen at the same *café* with the same comrades, but he stayed there a shorter time, did not drink so much, and disappeared for entire hours together, which he passed, either at his own house, at the Louvre, or the library, in the calm and retirement of the reading-rooms or galleries that are so full on Sundays, so deserted on other days.

“I am good for nothing,” he said to Verroy; “I try at least to do nothing wrong.”

But the time was not lost that he spent in those places. His reading, a little capricious at first, was selected by chance from some book lying open on a table, whose title or print had struck him, and had become by degrees more methodical; he had become interested in the history of Art, and applied himself to it energetically, in his walks in the Louvre as well as in his reading.

"It will probably be of no use to me," said he, "but it is always that much acquired!"

His comrades had hardly teased him at all about his change, for he had not broken suddenly off with his old habits; he simply disappeared every day for a little longer time, so that one evening he heard some one say:

"We see nothing more of Masson. What has become of him?"

And an acquaintance replied:

"It has been so for a long time; it is nearly two years now since he retired from the world."

It had only been for about three weeks, but one is so soon forgotten when ties have such little stability, as such as these, that make absences appear eternal.

He spoke but little of Virginie, not being able to find his friends alone for a minute. The implacable Philomène had taken possession of the Verroys, as though she had created them with her own hands. Charles, through many pretexts, escaped her; but poor Marie could no longer rid herself of this companion, who was as faithful, and who stuck as close as Nessus' tunic. Philomène had determined to see Paris, wholesale and retail; and, making a pretext of her ignorance and inability, she made Marie take her to all the different places she wished to go—which was no small thing to do.

You have known, Parisians, the martyrdom of pionëering country friends from the Champs Elysées to the Place de la Bastille, who wish to see and learn everything about all things. You know what it has cost your light and

subtle brain to have to tell about historical facts, of which, perhaps, your knowledge is very imperfect; to be obliged to give minute explanations about things of which you do not know the least word: and all under the pain of falling deeply in the esteem of people who are much more serious and much better instructed than yourself. You have taken a gentleman to the *Jardin des Plantes*, who gave a lecture on natural history to his children, saying as he pointed out the elephant who stretched out his voracious trunk towards you: "That pachydermatous animal is very sociable," and the *gamins* behind you call your friend the pachydermatous animal. You have vainly tried to oppose the purchase of some horrible Tunisian jewelry, some abominable Harcem pastilles, that some well-intentioned aunt with doubtful taste has given your wife, saying to her: "My dear friend, I have brought you a souvenir from the Exhibition;" and your wife has been obliged to display the horrors the next day at a large dinner, or, if she forgets it, the good aunt makes her remember, gently and firmly, what is due the presents of a rich relation who is very fond of you. You have explained about a hundred things of which you do not understand an iota; repeated to them what you have seen in the journals in regard to the number of cubic *mètres* the "captive balloon" contains, making a mistake of several hundreds only; but all this is nothing in comparison to the martyrdom of taking about Paris, in ordinary times, some woman who wishes to examine everything, and who stops before the small, dark, linen-drapers' shops around the *Halles*, to see "if they make caps there as they make them with us."

There were no more bright and indefinable conversations, that touched lightly on a thousand subjects, with implied words that every one understood; no more long æsthetical discussions with Verroy's friends! Masson found Philomène between himself and everything that was removed from the common-place. She seated herself at his side, and took entire possession of him when it was possible, and when circumstances would not permit it, she looked at him talking, listening to him with her eyes as well as her ears; as soon as he had finished she drew him towards her, as one draws a beetle, by pulling on the thread it has attached to its leg, and the poor man fell back into the dulllest colored prose.

"He converses well," she said one evening, after he had left to play in his third act.

"Yes, cousin, but you do not let him talk!" Charles replied.

"I? How can you say so? I listen to him all the time."

"When he speaks of what interests you."

"What do you expect? I am a poor, ignorant woman. I have never lived among clever people like yourselves; it is not my fault if I am wanting in manners!"

But she did not change her conduct. Why should she have done so? It pleased her to keep Masson near her and to prevent his talking to others. The young actor seeing in this a proof of troublesome but real friendship, tried to please her as much as it was in his power, by bringing her all sorts of little gifts that Madame Crépin seized with avidity, and buried at once in her enormous

trunk, that was a heavy and mysterious enigma, the key of which never left her.

One night he took her to the theatre to see him act. Marie refused to go, first being too happy not to have to see again an uninteresting play that she knew by heart since a long time, and then at being able to pass a nice evening quite alone with her husband—a pleasure that had not been theirs for a long while. Without stopping about the question of propriety, a question which in this particular case could not be discussed, thanks to Philomène's age, and the disparity of their positions, Marie dressed her cousin with her own hands, put one of her bonnets on her head, and sent her off joyfully, with Masson as her cavalier.

In the carriage which bore them away, Philomène showed herself but little communicative; Masson was obliged to undertake all the efforts of conversation, and with his customary generosity did not spare himself, so that they reached the theatre in a very pleasant frame of mind. Going to the ticket-office, he said to the Minos intrusted with the distribution of seats:

"Give me a nice little box for Madame, a relation of mine, who is at Paris for a few days."

Minos looked at Masson's relation, and his glance clearly expressed a thought that might be thus translated: "your relation has a good style!" then he presented Madame Crépin a small, square, dirty card, which she let fall almost immediately. Masson hurrying to pick it up, was pushed from behind by a crowd of people arriving, and getting entangled in the train of Philomène's gown,

nearly fell on his nose on the ground ; but by the help of a *gendarme* who stretched out his arm to him, the accident was avoided.

"This way," said the young actor, still laughing at his mishap.

Philomène, looking very prim, followed him, confronted by the glances of the doorkeepers, who seemed to reproach Masson for the bad taste shown in this conquest, and she soon found herself installed in a dark *baignoire* two steps from the foot-lights, that blinded her.

"You will not be badly off here," said the young man, when the door-keeper had noisily placed a small, high stool under Madame Crépin's large feet, that were attached to her very long legs ; "I will return to you during the *entr'acte*."

"Are you going to leave me?" said Philomène, tenderly, and not a little anxiously.

"To seek glory!" Masson replied, with a comic heroic gesture. "I am obliged soon, in the third act, to say to the young rogues: 'By heaven, my lords—' And now I must go and see if everything is ready in my dressing-room. Imagine, the other day; some one put my large comb in one of Norval's funnel boots, that he wears in the second act; the unfortunate fellow pulled them on without looking inside of them, of course: when he reached the stage he felt something hurting him atrociously! It was impossible to take them off during the act; and as he was about doing so in the *entr'acte*, they came and told him a lady was awaiting him at the *concierge's* lodge: he flew there; it was only a trick. The

bell for the third act rang ; he was obliged to appear on the stage, still suffering dreadfully ; I all the while was hunting for my comb ! I could not find it, naturally, and I was obliged to play without having my hair combed, which, by the way, did not make a good effect upon the public. After the play was over, Norval took off his boots, the doctor was sent for, the poor fellow had his foot full of blisters ; some one put his hand carefully into the funnel and drew out my comb, broken in three pieces. Norval was not in a good humor, you may be sure—nor myself either.”

A distant bell sounded behind the curtain.

“*À tantôt !*” said Masson.

He went away, leaving Philomène in a state bordering on distraction. The gas, the curtain with its hole, to which a new eye was applied every moment, the comb, the funnel boots—she imagined a tin funnel, with a spout and handle, such as one sees at wine merchants’—all this whirled wildly round in her brain. Her small stool annoyed her, a chair placed behind her hurt her shoulder, and she did not dare to push these strange things away, that were put there for some purpose of which she was ignorant.

People began coming in, and the theatre was filled with that particular sound, which is not either that of the roar of waves, nor the tumult of a marching day in a military station, but which in a manner resembles them both. The doorkeepers came in and went out with their rough vivacity, making the ugly deep pink ribbons on their dirty caps float everywhere, even as far as the front of the boxes. The sharp voices of the opera-glass sellers

sounded at regular intervals, like the croaking of an ominous crow; the instruments were being tuned in the way every one knows, and the base drummer, who was placed nearly at Philomène's feet, after having gently touched the skin of his instrument, so as to assure himself it was in tune, spread out an immense journal, that covered the two drums, and read attentively some bit of news that was printed in very small type, which made him bend his back over in an alarming manner, when suddenly the gas mounted half way up the foot-light chimneys, three knocks were heard from no one knew where, the drummer threw his journal suddenly behind him, and a short and formidable *crescendo* of all the instruments, upheld by the rolling of the drums, ended in a frightful crash that made Philomène jump up with fear. The violins wailed a sentimental cadence, a loud noise of rolling scenes grated on her ears, while at the same time a current of cold, bad-smelling air struck her face, a black gulf opened before her, and strangely attired men ran hither and thither, like madmen, in the half-light. The curtain rose and the play began.

Philomène had read some theatrical plays in a volume that had formerly fallen into the Captain's hands, and the mysteries of entrances and exeunts were less incomprehensible to her than for some others, who had never read "comedy plays," as they say in the country; but one thing puzzled her so much that she nearly lost the thread of the drama, already rather mixed up in her mind: opposite to her, between two side-scenes, of which she could

neither divine the name nor use, but which space she designated to herself as "a corridor," there were some lamps, and under these lamps persons in every-day dress, who did not seem in the least interested in what was taking place on the stage, three feet off from them.

Placed as she was, Philomène was able to plunge a curious glance behind the scenes.

What was her astonishment at seeing suddenly one of the madmen, who was running across the stage pursuing another, catch him at the entrance of one of the corridors, pierce him through with his sword, and draw back with horrified eyes, while the other, the one who had just been killed, arose and went quietly to talk with a gentleman in an overcoat, whom she recognized as Masson! The tail of a white horse that appeared at the latter's side made her entirely lose her head, and she threw herself back in her chair with the discouraged air of one who is struggling with something too strong for him, and who acknowledges himself vanquished.

Torches were brought, the stage was lighted up, and the madmen disappeared after a general *mêlée*. The white horse whose tail Philomène had already seen now entirely appeared, a beautiful lady got off it, and two lovers murmured phrases to her that were as long as they were tender; suddenly a gunshot was heard, the fair lady uttered a piercing cry and fell down before the prompter's box—which was another puzzling mystery to Philomène—and the curtain descended amidst the groans of the violins, while one of the lovers raised towards the ceiling the slashed sleeves of his black velvet *pourpoint*.

CHAPTER XXIX.

HOW TO EAT AN ORANGE.

THE door of the box opened softly and Masson put his head through the opening.

"Well, how are you getting on?" said the good fellow; "are you amusing yourself?"

"Certainly, Monsieur Masson; it is very interesting."

For nothing in the world would Philomène have confessed that she understood absolutely nothing about it, and she put on a comprehending air.

"The young actress is very bad," continued Masson, "but it is not her fault; she plays as well as she can. By-and-by you will see a superb scene, and then there will be a ballet."

"A ballet?" Philomène asked.

"Yes, with *danseuses*. It is very amusing, as you will see! *à tantôt!*"

"Are you going to leave me alone in this way?" Madame Crépin asked, in a tone of gentle reproach. "If you would only explain the play to me a little!"

"Well, I do not act for an hour; I can stay for a little while. But don't ask me to explain the play to you! I have not seen it yet."

"What! not seen it? Why, you act in it!"

"I have seen the third act, in which I appear, but I

have not even seen that entirely, because I leave before it is over; but the play is not good—it does not make much money, in spite of all they do to advertise it, and I have no curiosity to see it.”

A play in which one *acts* and still has never seen, the advertising—all this appeared so strange to Madame Crépin, that rather than believe it, she preferred to doubt Masson's veracity.

Of course he spoke falsely in saying he had never seen the play, but it was only to make her think so in fun; but this fact, far from diminishing the esteem Philomène felt for her hero, increased it greatly. She considered falsehood a weapon, and the art of using it a proof of strength.

“That fellow is not stupid,” she said to herself; “but I am more cunning than he.”

Which was a sweet and comforting thought to her, if ever there was one.

To prove her superiority, she asked Masson a number of questions, which, in her mind, went to show that she possessed an extraordinary knowledge of life and worldly ways. He answered with the good-nature that formed the foundation of his character, without making fun of or deceiving her, which was meritorious on his part, for the temptation to do so was a strong one. Then he offered her an orange, which she accepted with the gratitude a woman might feel to whom a charming man, whose name is printed on the play-bills, shows a mark of affectionate esteem in public.

She peeled her orange—not very nicely, however, and

here and there tore away a part of the pulp with her fingers, that were rather clean, but which were terminated with nails that were not entirely so. This operation was performed on the lady's pocket-handkerchief, that she spread over her knees. Her handkerchief was made of coarse linen, ornamented with a very fine, small red stripe; it had passed the day in Philomène's pocket, together with a number of various things, and was not the nicer for it. When the massacre of the orange was over, Madame Crépin put two quarters of it back in the skin, and offered them to Masson.

"Thanks!" said he, while a little sensation of horror ran over him; "I do not like oranges."

"You say that in order not to deprive me of it," she said, smiling in a way that would have softened a rock. "I saw you eat some this summer at my cousin's house; do take it: all of it is not worth the half!"

This phrase, which the widow had borrowed from something she had read, left Masson defenceless; he took the quarters of the orange, rose, pretended to look about the theatre, and pointing out to his too kind friend's attention a lady wearing an extraordinary bonnet, he threw the orange behind his chair, and taking out his pocket-handkerchief, wiped his fingers and lips like a man who has just swallowed something very good.

"They are still a little green," he said; "they will be better in a month."

Philomène threw him an expressive glance.

"In a month," said the glance, "I will no longer be here to eat oranges!"

But Masson did not understand, seeing which Philomène sighed.

"It is more amusing here than at Diélette," said the good fellow, who thought quite the contrary.

"Yes! But I must, however, return there," said the widow, regretfully; "but rest assured I shall carry away the memory of your friendship for me."

"In what, the devil!" thought Masson, "does this good woman see friendship? Well, much good may it do her!"

"It is very sad to see each other in this way, to be so happy together, and then to part to see each other no more."

"But you will see your cousins again, dear Madame; they intend to pass next summer at La Heuserie."

"They, yes; but you?"

"I too; ah! *parbleu!* I too! What should I do elsewhere?"

These thoughtless words escaped! Masson in the warmth of his enthusiasm for the country that possessed Virginie, and Madame Crépin took them as meant for her. Let no one accuse us of improbability; such things occur every day, at every minute, and to every one—only when such things happen to clever people, they do not speak of them to any one.

"Do you then love that country so much?" she said, disguising her emotion in feigned merriment.

• "I love it so much, that I do not think any place in the world more beautiful!"

"Ah! so much the better! I do not see, however, what you find so beautiful in it!"

"Ah! dear Madame, everything. The sea, the sky, the cliffs, the verdure, everything—everything, in a word!"

"I do not understand what beauty you can discover in the ugly gray rocks on the cliffs; the verdure is pretty enough, perhaps, although it is much more beautiful at Cotentin—"

"I cannot explain what I find so especially charming in your country, but it touches my heart, and as Mignon sings: 'It is there I would wish to live!'"

Three knocks were heard, and Masson rose.

"Stay," murmured Madame Crépin, really beautified by a return of youthfulness and feeling, that increased in her with surprising strength.

"It is impossible; but I will come after you before the end of the play, so you will not get lost in this crowd."

He went out, shut the box door, and while the play was unravelling its mysteries, Philomène, thrown back in her chair, with her hands open on her knees, gave herself up to the most delirious dreams. Everything intoxicated her: the overheated atmosphere of the theatre, the public's attitude that awaited with trembling impatience the great and beautiful scene of the play, and prepared itself to break down everything with its applause. The passionate atmosphere in which a drama should live, if it is worth anything, acted upon Madame Crépin with all the more intensity because she found herself in it for the first time. She plunged into unknown gulfs with the emotion of a woman, who is borne away on a swing, and who, clasping the ropes and feeling herself falling in the air on the frail, piece of

board, breathes with delight the dizziness of the fall; her head turned, her hands became moist, and she said over to herself: "I love him! I love him!" and without asking herself why, or how or what would be the morrow of this day that was unique in her life.

Suddenly she caught up the playbill, to see by what name he who would henceforth be the moving power of all her life was called in the play. He bore a sonorous name—but had he not said he should not play till the next act? However, she began to follow the drama with fresh interest. What would he do when the accidents of the play brought him upon the stage? She listened to the entire act with the same feverish attention that the other spectators evinced. When it was over she turned towards the box-door, hoping he would enter. She was aware, however, that Masson could not come, for he was dressing himself—but who knew? She had reached that state of mind, that all of us have experienced more or less, wherein probabilities or improbabilities no longer exist; where the thing we most desire seems the only one that can possibly happen; where we believe everything, expect everything, through need of that common sense which would make us justly appreciate the proportion of events.

After ten minutes, that seemed ten centuries to impatient Philomène, the bell in the *foyer* rang, and the theatre was filled again by people making the usual noise of those who return to their places after the *entr'acte*, when glasses of beer have been drunk in the *café* down-stairs, and when the public's first involuntary coldness is dissipated. It is

the time for conversation between friends. Those who know the play announce to others, who have not yet seen it, the wonders which they are about to witness. In vain do some cry, "silence!" and others, "sit down!" The late people slip in between the rows of *fauteuils*, knocking over the ladies' small benches, and walking on the men's feet, with the self-possession of persons who have paid for their seats and owe nothing to any one.

Impatient and breathless, Philomène threw angry glances over the noisy and undisciplined crowd. Vainly did she stretch her ears; she could scarcely distinguish a few shreds of the dialogue. At length, the last late comer in the third gallery having ceased to quarrel with a gentleman who was but little forbearing—thanks to the happy intervention of the "municipal"—she was able to follow again the increasing interest of the drama that was leading the breathless public towards a catastrophe. But what would it be? Those who had not seen the play could not divine it, so skilfully was the intrigue managed. At last, little Gadoreau, as Masson had said, fell, pierced with a terrible sword-thrust, and Masson, with the order of the Golden Fleece around his neck, his face white, rosy and fresh-looking, wearing a jet-black moustache, a crimson velvet cap, a white satin *pourpoint* and a velvet mantle embroidered with gold, and followed by twenty men-at-arms, appeared on the stage with a resounding voice:

"My lord the duke, you have done a sorry task!"

"My lord the duke!" screamed the supernumeraries, falling back a pace.

"How handsome he is! Ah! how handsome he is!" thought Philomène, feeling all her blood mount to her face. "Dear Masson!" cried her heart, which beat as it had never before beaten when near the defunct Captain; "La Heuserie belongs to you, and all that I possess, and the owner of those goods herself!"

Leaning over the front of the box, she followed the young man with passionate looks, without thinking of the public or the actors, so much so that when Masson, after a superb gesture, returned behind the scenes, one of his comrades said to him:

"Who is that yellow-colored woman you have brought here?"

"Where?" said Masson, naïvely, who had forgotten all about Madame Crépin.

"There, opposite to us; she is devouring you with her eyes!"

"That?" said the young man, placing a finger mysteriously on his lips. "Silence! That is my tailor's aunt; I am in good luck!"

"Villanous joker!" said the loud voice of the "first gentleman," who was listening to them. "One should not make fun of one's tailor's aunt; it is a useful acquaintance."

So that no one, not even himself, would believe in Masson's good fortune, which was, however, real. But, alas! Philomène was not pretty enough to provoke calumny.

The next *entr'acte* sped by, mortally long for every one except Madame Crépin, who continued to dream wide awake, and towards the middle of the following act she

saw her hero re-enter the box, clad in a frock-coat, and in every way looking like himself, and not like the brilliant apparition of the third act.

"Ah! how well you play!" she said to him, forgetting all prudence to such a degree that the people near turned round.

"Why, there is Masson!" said some in the *footeuils*.

Annoyed at this circumstance, the young man turned his back to the theatre.

"Don't speak so loud," said he, discreetly. "No, I do not act well, and it is absurd in them to trouble me to come here to utter such stupidities. But, never mind. Is not the play droll?"

Philomène did not find it droll at all, and Masson had all the trouble in the world to make her understand that the word "droll" has not the same signification for the inhabitants of Diélette as for those of the boulevards, and, failing to do so, he finally gave it up.

"She has not a very open intelligence," thought he, with as little deference towards her as it was possible to feel. "What an idea in the Verroys to hamper themselves with that woman!"

Everything ends in this world, even mediæval melodramas, and towards midnight Philomène found herself on Masson's arm, on an unknown boulevard, amidst the rushing to and fro of carriages and omnibuses, and five minutes afterwards was in one of those same carriages, that was bearing her away, not very quickly, towards her cousins' abode.

She had read in novels of similar scenes—how, at the coming out of a theatre, Arthur being seated near Mathilde in a satin-lined coupé, drawn by two full-blooded horses, had at last found courage to speak of a passion that could no longer be restrained. How, emboldened by the darkness, he had dared to clasp the little hand of her whom he loved, and how the avowal of his passion fell eloquently from his lips, that had been sealed too long from a feeling of duty and reason.

She thought over these thrilling scenes, but Arthur said nothing at all; he was sleepy, and was thinking that he certainly would keep the carriage to take him home, and that therefore he would have done better to have taken it by the hour, and that not having done so was a want of prudence on his part that might cost him a franc more, unless he happened to have a very conscientious driver.

Masson's saying nothing made Philomène sigh, and he felt himself obliged to speak to her.

"Well, do you think you will grow fond of going to the theatre?" he asked her, in a calm voice.

"I do not know; I think I would like all plays in which you might act," said Madame Crépin, burning her ships. But this conflagration produced no results, for Masson replied at once, unmaliciously:

"I have, however, acted in a great many poor ones, and will act in many more of the same kind."

Madame Crépin's ships felt humiliated at having burned in vain, but this was due, on the young man's part, to an excess of delicacy, or perhaps from being absent-minded.

Actors are renowned for the number and frequency of their thoughtlessnesses, and so she took heart of grace.

"They are soon going to give something else," continued Masson; "after the first week I can get two *fautcuils* for you. I could not give them to you for the *première*, the seats are all disposed of beforehand; but Charles and Marie will tell you about the play."

"The *première*? What is that?" asked Philomène.

"The first representation of a new drama," the young man answered, putting a dot over his *i*.

"Will Charles and Marie go?"

"Certainly. There is never a *première* without them."

"Ah!" observed the lady, with a stiff manner.

It displeased her that her cousins should have an advantage over her, that did not come from their fortune, but from the consideration felt towards them and from their notoriety. She said nothing about it, however, and brought back to a sense of her present situation by an emotion she could not overcome, she let the light of the carriage-lamps fall on her ungloved hand, that she laid open on her knees. But Masson never dreamed of covering it with kisses.

"How slowly this horse goes!" exclaimed he at length, in despair at the duration of the drive.

"Does the time seem so long to you, then?" Philomène asked, coquettishly.

"To the contrary, dear Madame; but it is late, and you must be tired."

"Not the least in the world. I would like to drive

on like this forever," she said, in a sweet voice, full of restrained emotion.

"The diligence at Pieux, even, goes faster than this," said Masson, leaning out of the carriage-window: "I say, driver, if you don't go faster, we will get out and take another carriage!"

"Ah, *bien!*" replied the automaton, "if you think that would punish me, you are mistaken."

However, he hurried his horse a little, and our friends got out before the Verroys' house.

"So much the worse for you," said Masson, "I will go the rest of the way on foot. I think I shall get home all the sooner," and he dismissed the carriage. "I wish you good-night, dear Madame."

"Good-night, Monsieur; I thank you with all my heart. I assure you that never, Monsieur Masson, no, never, will I forget this evening; and if I can do anything to prove my gratitude to you, nothing would be too much, you may believe me."

"You are too kind, dear Madame," said Masson, with his most ceremonious bow; "I do not deserve as much as all that. *Au revoir!*"

"When will you come again?"

"I do not know. The first day possible."

In order to end the conversation, he had rung the bell himself. The door opened, and Philomène was obliged to enter it, and Masson went off joyfully towards his own home, without thinking any more of Madame Crépin than of his old rôles in days past.

CHAPTER XXX.

DIÉLETTE ONCE MORE.

THE evenings were long at Diélette, and they were obliged to light the lamp early. Madame Aubier's eyes were beginning to fail her, and she liked to wait to do so until the last gleams of daylight had disappeared. She watched from her window the red tints, then the orange-colored, and then the pale yellow ones lessening in the sky, until a tender green hue gradually overspread the horizon, where a scarcely perceptible vague light still floated, till the stars appeared, one after another. From over the darkened garden and across the black trees came the memory of many past hours to her, which slowly arose from the old lady's heart to her lips, while Virginie, seated on a low chair, listened to her talking attentively, holding her hands crossed on her knees.

Since Monsieur and Madame Verroy's departure, the intimacy that had always been so tender between these two women had assumed a new character. They were no longer together as a matron and a child in their relation of protecting affection on one side, and caressing deference on the other. There was a perfect harmony between these two pure souls, both of whom had their trials, and they understood each other entirely. Virginie had never made any allusion to what she felt for Masson, and her

godmother had never given her advice or consolation concerning it; but in their looks, in certain gestures, in the tone of their deep-feeling voices, in the long silences that followed the evening talks, was apparent a resigned trust on the young girl's side, and a deep pity on the old lady's.

Nothing was changed in Virginie's sweet ways and her good temper. She went hither and thither, rendering kind services to every one; to Monsicur Aubier, with whom she played dominos in the evening, in order to prevent his going to play them elsewhere; to the servant-maid; whose work she lightened; and, above all, to her godmother, who never needed to express a wish; for a movement, a simple look, were at once divined by the young girl.

But the merry gayety, the songs she used to sing all day long, the good romps in the grass with the old, fat dog, who recovered his legs to run after her, all this had disappeared with Masson. Her childhood, which had been prolonged by a tardy development of character beyond ordinary limits, had suddenly given place to all the anxieties, to all the dreams of youth. She was not sad; she was grave, feeling that a great change was taking place within her, and that she was entering a new life, that was full of joys and of unknown cares.

Masson had departed, carrying away Virginie's heart with him; but he had not troubled her sweet soul. He had said nothing to her; but she knew, however, that he loved her, and, with the beautiful trust of innocent youth,

she felt sure he would return—sure that he would ask for her hand. Would he obtain it? There was where her anxiety began.

She knew nothing about him whom she loved; she had given her heart away without reflection, without precaution of any kind whatsoever. She knew he was an actor—Madame Aubier had told her so, and as Masson, who was very simple in his ways, had nothing of the adventurer about him, she said to herself that he went to the theatre to gain his living honestly, as a clerk goes to his office. Was he rich? What did that matter to her? He was well-dressed; he seemed comfortably off. What we call mediocrity is luxury in our peasant's eyes. He must, therefore, be rich.

But would father Beuron be satisfied with that kind of fortune? Would he accept as a son-in-law a man who acted at the theatre? Virginie was afraid he would refuse him, and in the dread of that refusal she blessed the long suspense that gave her with its anxieties the trembling joys of hope.

Since Philomène's departure a strange event had occurred every evening; at first Virginie attached no importance to it, but at the end of two weeks' time a vague disquiet had entered her observing mind. Lavenel went constantly to their house, under some pretext at first, and then by force of habit afterwards. He came in, bowed to them, sat down, or stood up, brought them the news of the day, told Virginie some idle story to make her laugh, asked about father Beuron, his harvest, his cows and

sheep, and then left, saying, contrary to the usages of politeness which gives precedence to old people :

"Good-evening, Mademoiselle Virginie; good-night, Madame Aubier."

Later he began to show a preference in wishing to talk to the young girl; he would sit down beside her and play with her ball of worsted; sometimes in fun he would pull the wool, which would make Virginie's knitting fall out of her hands; he joked about her preferences and tastes, and this with so affectionate an air, that Madame Aubier conceived a secret antipathy for the man, who had been indifferent in his manner before. Was he by any chance daring to pay attention to Virginie? A man who was almost married—*par exemple!*—it must be seen to! The young girl, who had suddenly become clear-sighted, acted with reserve towards him at first, and then with coldness, but it had no effect. Madame Lavenel having gone several times to pass an hour with Madame Aubier, Virginie had managed to absent herself during her visits; but the old woman was only the more amiable the next time she called. Seized with real alarm, Virginie one day asked her godmother:

"Is not Lavenel engaged to Philomène?"

"I have been told so," answered the good lady, "but neither he nor she have ever spoken to me about it."

Virginie remained thoughtful a moment.

"Godmother," she then said, raising her lovely, honest eyes to the old lady's face, "I perfectly detest that man."

"I also, my little girl," Madame Aubier replied.

They then began to laugh with one accord, but the next day Lavenel found them colder and more reserved than ever. He left early, and two days passed without his returning.

The two women were rejoicing over this result, when on the third day Virginie received a letter from her father. It was a short, and but little affectionate letter, such as he always wrote; he bade her return home immediately, saying her absence had lasted long enough.

Virginie, after having read it, gave the paper to her godmother, who examined it carefully, and returned it without saying a word.

"What must I do?" asked the alarmed young girl, whose eyes were full of tears, that she was struggling to restrain.

"Obey," Madame Aubier replied, turning away her head, as though she were deliberating about something. But the pretence did not succeed either with one or the other of them; they looked at each other and burst into tears, then opening their arms they clasped each other in a long embrace.

"There is something under all this," said the godmother at length; "be prudent, my darling; say nothing to any one, and write me all that happens to you."

"Oh! godmother, to leave you, to leave this house. You have been so ill, I was so happy with you! I have never loved you so much before!"

The poor child felt her heart was breaking; she did not endeavor to pierce the mystery of the sudden command;

it was enough for her to be obliged to bear the separation from all that she held dear. Would she not be a thousand times farther away from Masson at her father's house?

"Be prudent, do you hear, my child? Do not displease your father or your step-mother—"

Virginie shook her head sadly: displeasing her step-mother was her daily pain; and how could she help offending at every moment—by the simple fact of her existence—the avaricious, selfish woman, who loved nothing but money, and who was angry at Virginie for being alive, because she would succeed to a part of father Beuron's inheritance, who was thirty years older than herself!

"—And they will let you come back to me!" Madame Aubier ended.

This hope was the young girl's only real consolation. Nevertheless, it was with a heavy heart that she packed her valise, and set forth the next morning in the little *carriole* her father had sent to fetch her.

The evening following her departure Lavenel made his appearance at his usual hour; at the sound of his voice Madame Aubier raised her head suddenly and looked him full in the face. The grain merchant feigned not to see the movement, and looked all around the dining-room.

"Where is Mademoiselle Virginie?" said he, craftily. "I have brought her some chestnuts. They are new ones!"

"You know very well that Virginie has returned to her father's house," Madame Aubier said in a natural manner.

"I? How should I know it?" said Lavenel, much astonished, but without changing color.

"As you have been to father Beuron's house, you ought to know what takes place there."

"Who could have told you, Madame Aubier, that I have been to see father Beuron?" replied the good man, without lying, but not without dissimulating. Every one knows, do they not, that to dissimulate is not to lie? He did not deny it, but he could deny it, presently, should it be the case that no one had betrayed him.

"It was a letter from Beuron that apprised me of it."

"At all events, he could not have told you so!" answered Lavenel, becoming anxious.

"It is not always necessary to tell me things for me to learn them, my dear Monsieur," said Madame Aubier, with a cunning smile. "And, by the way, have you lately received any news from Philomène Crépin?"

"I?" said the betrothed man, nearly falling backward with surprise; "ch! my good lady, why should the widow Crépin write to me?"

"*Dame!* people write to each other sometimes, when they are even farther separated than yourselves; I thought she would keep you informed about her affairs."

"Oh! Philomène does not talk to every one about her affairs; every one has his own, is it not so? She is getting on at Paris as she likes: she is in good hands, moreover."

Madame Aubier looked at the wall in an absent manner; after a short silence, she continued:

"In good hands, you say—how do you mean?"

And she fastened as void a look as possible on her visitor.

"Ah! *mon Dieu!*" said Lavenel, in an innocent way, "there are some people who say she has promised them her inheritance. You have certainly heard that spoken of?"

The old lady continued staring at him, and he was obliged to end his phrase.

"If she has promised them her inheritance, it is probable they take good care of her, for fear of being disinherited."

"That would not be very clever on their part," observed Madame Aubier, "for if they take too good care of her, she will live as long as they do, and who would have her inheritance then?"

Lavenel bit his lips; his mother had strongly cautioned him not to irritate Madame Aubier! He would have done better to have listened to the counsels of maternal wisdom, but youth is presumptuous, and it is a consolation to say this to one's self, when one is forty years old.

"It must be of some concern to you, if Philomène has made a will in favor of her cousins, for after all, when people marry, it is customary for them to make a settlement on each other."

Caught in a snare, Lavenel muttered something about notaries, who ask nothing better than to make people spend money, and how much happier people were who married each other without any contract, under the law of a union of property; then he looked into the street,

announced to his hostess that it was very dark ; after which he left in a state of mind analogous to that of the fox who had been caught by a hen.

"She is not a woman," said he to himself, "she is the devil in person! How did she know that I had been to father Beuron's house? Bah! some gossip has told her that I started off from Diçlette in that direction. I went by the way of Les Pieux, however, but people are so talkative! They are never quiet till they have told all about their neighbor's affairs!" However, he entered his home in a thoughtful mood.

"Well?" said his mother on seeing him.

"She will put some stones under our wheels, mother," replied he. "It is not arranged yet! We will have some trouble!"

"We will only have the more merit in getting the better of it," this truly clever woman answered him, who had, however, never read Corneille.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MADAME AUBIER WRITES A LETTER.

ON the following day Madame Aubier received a letter from her goddaughter, and on perusing the first line she rubbed her eyes, thinking she must be mistaken, so improbable did what she read seem to her, although she had foreseen it:

"My dear godmother," wrote Virginie, "come to my rescue and protect me from frightful unhappiness: my father wishes to marry me to Lavenel. Never will I marry that man whom I hate. I would prefer to die."

The letter was not long; a few heart-broken phrases only, repetitions of the same cry of alarm, and a thousand childish expressions of endearment sent to her good godmother, who would know some way of protecting her—that was all!

Madame Aubier remained thoughtful. She knew father Beuron's obstinate and despotic character; and that to attack him openly would be to place before one's self the reasoning and intelligence of a wall; to endeavor to overcome him by gentleness and thoughtfulness would only be to make him firmer in that persistent determination of a man who is not overburthened with ideas, but who holds to those he has by chance, and who does not wish to pass for a weather-cock. Since his birth no one

had ever obtained anything from him by persuasion; he would have thought he was lowering himself by yielding.

The question of interest remained. Virginie would receive as her *dot* her mother's fortune, besides what her father would doubtlessly give her: Madame Aubier knew Lavenel too well, not to feel certain he had asked for and obtained something: if she could induce the obstinate old man to blame his prospective son-in-law for self-interested motives she would gain time, and for the present nothing more was necessary. Before a month Philomène would have returned, and then it would be the flour merchant's business to free himself from her furious hands.

"Suppose I write to Philomène?" the good woman thought. But she put aside this idea at once; to give over Virginie's name and peace of mind to that woman seemed to her more to be avoided than all the rest, for she knew nothing about the tender feelings the widow cherished for Masson, and believed in her good faith concerning her proposed marriage with Lavenel. "At all events I will write to Marie Verroy," concluded Madame Aubier, and immediately set herself to work, and in her large old woman's handwriting she announced the unhappy fact to her friends in Paris, leaving them to judge whether they should acquaint Masson or not about the fate in reserve for the young girl. Then she addressed a few words of consolation to her goddaughter, promising her to interfere about it, and after this excess of epistolary exertion she gave herself up to deep thought, during which time no flattering epithets were once accorded to Lavenel's name.

Our friends were breakfasting together when Madame Aubier's letter was brought to them with the rest of their mail. Philomène was dull; her morning walks to her debtor's house had thus far been without results, so that she had been obliged to place the affair in the hands of a business man. Every one knows that such persons do not solely work for the philanthropical end of making recalcitrant debtors pay their dues, and Madame Crépin had been obliged to unloosen the strings of her purse, an act which was always essentially disagreeable to her.

She was therefore dull, and eat but little—that is to say only the choice bits—leaving the rest on her plate. Her cousins, who were becoming accustomed to this manner of acting, without, however, succeeding in finding it pleasant, did not notice her, and were talking of their own affairs. Marie, in turning over the papers and printed matter of all sorts that made up their morning mail, found the letter bearing the postmark of Diélette, and could not control a slight start.

“What is it?” asked Charles, raising his head.

“Nothing,” said Marie, becoming prudent, without knowing why herself.

“Is it a letter?”

“An old story,” replied Marie, a little impatiently, as she put the letter in her pocket.

Charles returned to his cutlet, under the fire of Philomène's condemnatory look which expressed: “You are simply an idiot, my friend, to allow your wife to hide her letters in her pocket like that! I assure you my husband would be obliged to show me his!”

But Verroy saw neither the look nor the reproach it bore, and took a second cutlet, as his appetite was good.

The repast over, and Marie having shut the door on the train of Philomène's dress, who was obliged to return to disengage herself from it, before being able to leave the room, the young wife ran to Charles, and taking him by the arm dragged him into the inviolable sanctuary of their sleeping-room. For greater safety she bolted the door, and then went towards her husband with the letter in her hand.

"What mystery!" said the latter; "is some one claiming a hundred thousand francs of us?"

"No; but Madame Aubier has written to us," replied the young wife, who had read her letter while her husband had been talking. "They want to marry Virginie—to whom? I give you a thousand guesses about it—to Lavenel."

"Zounds!" exclaimed Charles.

"Marie!" said Philomène's lamentable voice behind the door, while she knocked modestly, but with persistence.

"I am coming," replied the latter.

"I want to say two words to you."

"Wait for me in the drawing-room; my husband is dressing himself."

Philomène did not answer, but no step on the other side of the door proved that she had left her post.

"What cravat do you wish?" asked Madame Verroy,

very loudly, as though she were addressing her husband. "I will go and get it for you."

"I am going myself," Charles replied, without moving from the arm-chair in which he had seated himself.

The noise of soft, light footsteps apprised them that Madame Crépin had left the place.

"Do you know this annoys me!" said Verroy, in a bad humor; "now we are even obliged to act parts. Is she not soon going away?"

"As soon as possible, dear," Marie answered, in a conciliatory tone. "But listen, Lavenel has asked for Virginie's hand!"

"I hope they sent him off politely!" said Verroy.

"No! Father Beuron has consented to give it to him."

"Well, and what are they going to do with Masson, then? What a fright for the young birds!"

More disturbed than he supposed he could be two minutes before, Charles began to walk up and down the room; he loved his friend sincerely and deeply; men's friendship is not full of affectionate phrases, but one need only see them when they are tried! They, who speak to each other like strangers, who scarcely clasp each other's hands, would, if necessary, be killed for each other. Had Verroy held, at that moment, either father Beuron or Lavenel himself by the hair, he would have thrown him out of the third-story window into the street, without thinking of the remorse such an impulsive action might cause him afterwards.

"And she—the little one—what does she say about it?" said he, stopping before his wife.

"She is in despair."

"Then she loves Masson!"

"Naturally."

Charles began his walk again. An almost imperceptible noise was heard in the corridor, and Marie put her finger on her lips; her husband, who was less patient, hurried towards the door, and opened it vehemently on Philomène, who had not had time to fly.

"What is the matter?" said he, with very little graciousness.

"It is the maid who wishes to see Marie," the widow stammered, much ashamed and embarrassed.

"Have the kindness, my dear cousin, to tell her to leave us in peace."

He shut the door, and this time Madame Crépin went away, making her heavy leather shoes resound as better evidence of her departure.

"Do you know that one of these fine mornings I shall tell some truths to her?" said Charles, suddenly become gay at the thought of this future skirmish. "I begin to need this recreation."

"Have a little patience, dear; listen now—it concerns those we love!"

"You are right. What must we do?"

"See Masson this very day! We cannot act without asking him what he wishes to do."

"That is true! I will go and send him a telegram, saying: '*Prudence and mystery!*'"

They left their retreat, and Charles went out to put his plan into execution.

As the telegram could not reach its address before two hours, Marie profited by this lapse of time to do a hurried errand, and Verroy, having calculated in the same manner about the delay, did likewise, and they both were absent for about three hours.

Philomène, who was much mystified about the morning's secret conference, remained in the drawing-room as she had the habit of doing. Seated in an arm-chair, in a studied attitude, with her train spread over the carpet, and a novel in her hand, she imagined herself a duchess, and dreamed about future plans that were vague, but delightful.

Masson entered. Forewarned by the telegram, he did not ask the cousin about what they might have to say to him, but he sat down beside her and began to talk to her. The woman amused him with her pretensions, so recently grafted on the older tree of her ambition; he found her droll and thought her good, which permitted him to use towards her the freedom of manner that his long intimacy with the Verroys authorized. Not imagining, moreover, that his friends could have any important communication to make to him, and supposing it was only a question of procuring some theatre tickets for some country friend of theirs, his mind was quite at rest.

Therefore he sat down by Madame Crépin in the best of spirits.

"How pretty you look!" said he to her, smiling; "you have put on a new cap. Is it in honor of me?"

"Of course!" the widow replied, blushing with pleasure.

"You knew, then, I was coming? I knew nothing about it myself two hours ago!"

"I am always expecting you!" said Madame Crépin, lowering her eyes.

Masson took this confession for a pleasant joke.

"That is very nice, at least, what you say to me!" he answered, with his usual good-nature; "everybody does not say as much. Are you going to remain here some time still?"

"I do not know; it does not depend on myself!"

"How happy you are to be able to live in that pretty country!" suddenly exclaimed the young man, letting the too great fulness of his heart overflow. "To live there in a little gray stone house, with a small garden—what a heaven it would be!—"

"All alone?"

"Ah! no, *par exemple!* not all alone! With my wife! La Heuscrie, with my wife—that is my ideal!"

Philomène felt her heart beat with delight—La Heuscrie and his wife! Should these two *desiderata* be united in one—the proprietor and the property—then Masson surely would have nothing more to ask of Heaven! Only to tell him so was not very easy, and to make him understand it, a task none the less delicate. Philomène said to herself she would use an auxiliary.

"Do you like the country, then, so much?" she asked, in a voice as melodious as her throat would allow.

"I adore it! It is repose; it is sleep! After this fiery

Paris that devours us, after evenings passed in that furnace which men call a theatre, to breathe the fresh air, to see the verdure, to talk to people who answer you in *patois*—what a dream it is!”

“I do not see what you can find attractive in *patois*,” said Philomène, with astonishing quickness; “I know when I returned from my travels, when I went to Havre and to Nantes, to join my late husband, that I found myself quite bewildered on returning to Diçlette! Excepting Madame Aubier, there was really no one to whom I could speak French!”

“Why,” said Masson, much surprised, “it seemed to me every one spoke French there.”

“Yes; to you!” answered Philomène, without perceiving she betrayed her silly vanity. “But they will not speak anything but *patois* to me, because I belong to the place!”

“Well, they don’t do very wrong!” Masson nearly said; but he restrained himself, however, and prudently kept silent.

“Is it so true, Monsieur Masson,” asked the widow, with an enigmatical smile, “is it positively true, that you have such a great desire to live at our place?”

“It is entirely true, and quite certain, dear Madame; but between the cup and the lip there is room for such a prodigious quantity of things, that I do not know whether my dream may ever be realized!”

“Courage, my friend!” said Philomène, looking out of the window; “one must always hope: chance brings about so many unexpected things!”

"Ah, yes!" said our hero, sighing, "I have a share in the 'Loan of the City of Paris.' I may draw the large prize! But there are so many shares, and only one large prize!"

"Decidedly," thought Madame Crépin, "he will never understand by himself! Poor fellow! it would be a real fortune for him! Added to what he earns, it would make a very nice income!"

Philomène had but little idea of what is considered a good income in Paris. She thought that with five or six thousand francs a year one might live in a little hotel, and buy a picture of a celebrated master from time to time, or something approaching one.

Just as she was about most probably to commit some irremediable blunder, Marie returned.

On seeing Masson indolently seated on a low chair, almost at his sweet friend's feet, she stopped, wishing to reassure herself about the eventuality of some indiscretion or imprudence on his part. But how should she rid herself of Philomène's useless society, to say the least of it? She had had many occasions of proving to herself the futility of all attempts, having for object the dismissal of that dear soul from the room when she received a visit, so that, impelled by the urgency of the circumstance, she took a desperate resolve.

"I have an errand to do," said she to Masson, "and I wish to consult you about a purchase. Can you go with me?"

"Always!" replied the good fellow, who seized his hat and went towards the door.

It has happened to most of us, when we are walking in the country, to search about in hedges for blackberries or strawberries, the fruit appears half-hidden under the leaves. We at first put aside the branches and the grass with care. Then, as habit teaches us where the fruit is to be found without hunting for it so much, we pick and eat it carelessly for a few seconds, and then suddenly, just as our hand is advancing to cull a new cluster, warned by something inexplicable, we bend our head suddenly and look, and instead of what we thought to grasp, we find at our finger-ends some hideous reptile—a toad, that stares at us with its great, open eyes, or an enormous spider threatening us with all the might of its venomous nature. Nothing is able to describe to those who have not felt it, what the sensation is of horror and disgust that runs over one in an instant from one's head to one's feet, and which returns two or three times, and seems to seize one's very heart.

Surprise has a great part in this sensation, and disappointment as well; but more than all the rest, is the violent contrast in it—the discovery of a monster, where we had hoped to find a small pleasure.

This same sensation, this same shock, ran over Marie's person, when on the threshold, just as she was turning to say "good-bye" to her cousin, she caught her look full of odious suspicions, and fraught with envy and hatred. She trembled, and drew herself up as if an unclean reptile had touched her; but the look had become vague, and was only fixed upon the wall—the nightmare had disappeared, as such do when we awake.

"Ah!" said the young woman, with a sigh that was mingled with disgust and relief.

"What is the matter?" asked Masson, hastily.

"Nothing. Come; Charles is waiting for us downstairs."

She left, followed by the young man. Charles was not awaiting them, and she knew it; but she could not resist the desire of protecting herself against Philomène's look.

"I have something to tell you," began Madame Verroy, as soon as they were out of doors.

"Is that why you sent for me?" asked Masson, more and more surprised.

"Yes, we are at home in our own house no longer; we are continually watched. But listen: they want to marry Virginie."

"Ah!" said the young actor, suddenly changing countenance and stopping short.

He had become so pale and so overcome that Marie repented her want of precaution; but she was still so deeply affected by her recent shock, that she did not possess her ordinary clearness of judgment.

"It is not arranged," she said with haste; "do not despair; Madame Aubier wrote me that Lavenel had asked for her goddaughter's hand."

"Lavenel? That is enough to make one wonder if one can be in one's right mind. Virginie and Lavenel! It is an unkind joke."

"Unfortunately, it is serious."

"And she allows this to be done to her?"

"No," replied Madame Verroy, gently, "she wrote her godmother, imploring her to prevent it."

"Then she does not wish to marry him?"

"She says she would rather die."

"The dear child!" murmured Masson. Then he kept silence for a moment: "Would she accept me, if I asked her?"

"She? Why, she wants no one but you."

Masson warmly grasped Madame Verroy's hand, that was hanging by her side: it was his way of thanking her. Involuntarily the young woman raised her eyes towards her window; but Philomène had not remembered that observatory. At the same moment, Charles, who was returning home, joined them.

"What are you plotting there?" said he to them.

"We are talking of our secret affairs," Marie answered.

"In the street? Would you not be better off upstairs?"

"No, Argus is watching."

Charles murmured a few words, that he probably did not deem worthy his companions' ears; then he said, emphatically:

"Let us take a carriage, then."

So that it was in the Bois de Boulogne, in a large coupé found at a neighboring stand, that Masson's hopes and feelings were discussed between our three friends; but in spite of their debates and the going over the same arguments, the result remained unchanged: that it was useless

to present himself as an aspirant to Virginie's hand, unless he had something positive to offer her.

"But," finally asked Madame Verroy, "what would your mother say to such a marriage?"

"My mother? Dear Madame, it would only be sufficient for me to speak to her about it, for her to see an imp of Satan in the woman I wish to marry. And then, it seems to me, that marriage will separate me farther still from the Seminary."

"Oh!" said Charles, looking out of the carriage-window, "as far as that goes at present—"

Our friends could not help laughing at this skeptical remark, and Marie took a resolution that was as sudden as astounding.

"I am going to see your mother myself," she said, "and I have every reason for believing that she will not take me for an imp of Satan."

"Will you do that?" exclaimed Masson.

"Certainly."

"Will you go to Maçonnais, to that little village no larger than Diçlette, and persuade my poor, obstinate mother that I am not the last of prodigal sons, and that I might desire to perpetuate my father's name, which she has worn so worthily!"

"We will go, will we not, Charles?" said Marie.

"Do anything you like, provided you do not take Philomène with you."

This was not to be feared, and Madame Verroy determined to leave the next day. Our three conspirators

separated at the threshold of Charles' door, grasping each other's hands like the Swiss of Grütli, but without singing the smallest trio.

On seeing the husband and wife return alone, and together, Philomène could not control a movement of vexation.

"Did you meet each other then?" she asked Marie, sullenly.

"Why, of course; Charles joined us at the door. It was arranged beforehand," said the latter, a little maliciously.

"Yes, we were to go together to the Bois de Boulogne," added Charles, with noticeable satisfaction. It is so pleasant to annoy people a little whom one does not like. Moralists have never been able to decide whether this last pleasure exceeds that of being nice to those one loves; we must believe, therefore, that it depends on people and circumstances, for opinions are much divided in regard to it.

To have been to the Bois de Boulogne! With Masson! Without herself! Philomène looked round the dining-room, where this conversation had taken place during dinner, and then cast her eyes down on her plate, and stopped eating, contenting herself with making a number of little bread balls, that she spread on her empty plate, in a manner to attract attention.

"Are you not hungry?" asked Marie.

"No."

"Are you ill?"

"Yes."

"Where are you suffering?"

"Everywhere. For a long while!"

"You should see a physician."

"What would be the good of it? I know very well I shall never make old bones!"

Charles plunged his carving-knife into the *poulet-aucresson*, so energetically that he broke the porcelain plate in two.

"There!" said he, with a contented air, "a little exercise does one good. Julie, bring a plate!"

The maid brought the required plate and carried away the pieces of the other one with an alarmed look, but Verroy seemed delighted, and he divided the innocent fowl equally, without evincing any more emotion.

"A wing of fowl, cousin?" said he, quietly.

"No; thanks, cousin, it will not agree with me."

"You must not eat anything to disagree with you; I would rather eat it myself than do you any harm. Marie, have you arranged everything for your journey?"

"No, dear, but it will only take an hour."

"Are you going on a journey?" Madame Crépin asked, suddenly recovering her strength.

"A few days' absence. But you can remain here if your business is not yet finished."

"My business is finished," said Philomène, curtly, "at least as much as it will ever be. I cannot stay all winter in Paris—"

"Why not?" said Charles, with angelic sweetness, but Madame Crépin would take no notice of his question.

"I am going away also," said she, regretfully. "I did not think it would be decided so suddenly—I have some purchases to make; not much, for I am not rich, but—"

"There is no necessity for your going away," replied Marie, with her usual kindness; "my husband is going to remain here; you can keep house for him during my absence."

"Well, if it will not disturb you—I have not thought of such a sudden separation—I have a very sensitive heart! This pains me more than you can believe."

"Julie, the dessert!" said Charles, in a voice of thunder. The little maid hastened, affrighted, asking herself what could have changed her master's character in this way, who was generally so amiable.

CHAPTER XXXII.

CONFIDENCES.

AFTER dinner, Verroy having apparently regained his amiability, went out to smoke his cigar on the balcony, and Philomène followed her cousin into the small drawing-room where she generally worked.

"You are going away?" said she to her, sitting down by her side on the sofa.

"Yes! I must; it is a business journey."

"You have not spoken of it!"

"I knew nothing about it this morning; its necessity has only just become apparent."

Madame Crépin asked herself whether Masson had not something to do with this affair, but the idea seemed so improbable to her that she gave it up immediately. But if her cousin went away, what would become of the confidence she had made up her mind to make her? Would it not be better to assure herself of the young woman's kindness before her departure, so as to profit largely by her absence for realizing her ambitious hopes? With the beetle-like obstinacy particular to persons who are much infatuated with themselves, she decided to burn her ships.

"I shall be gone, perhaps, when you return," said she to her.

"Why?"

Philomène kept silent and lowered her head.

"Are you unhappy here?" asked the young woman, with a vague impression that her husband martyred her, when she was not there to protect her.

"Unhappy! I am as happy here as one could be anywhere in the world. But it is time for me to leave; I have remained here only too long."

"Why?" asked Marie again, for her phrase was turned in such a manner as to provoke this question inevitably.

"Do you wish to know the reason?"

"Certainly, since I have asked it of you!"

Philomène seemed to collect herself for a supreme effort, and really it did cost her something; her self-love blinded her sufficiently to hide to herself the absurdity of her aspirations, but a sort of sincere shame arrested the words on her lips, just as she was about to make the confession of her weakness. If only she had not sworn so many times, that, after having loved the Captain so much, she could never look at any other man, no matter who he was! Imprudent words! Why does one utter them? Would it not be a hundred times wiser to keep what one thinks to one's self? She promised herself to do so in the future—but not this time of course—and this was where her great wisdom was in default.

"Since you wish to know it," said she, turning her face half aside, covered with confusion and blushes, "it is on account of Masson."

Marie thought she had not heard rightly—in reality she had only understood wrongly.

"Masson! Has he been disagreeable to you?"

"He? Why, he is the best of men, and the most amiable!"

"But then?"

"This is it, my dear: I fear if I should see him often, and for a long while, that I should become too much attached to him."

"You? Masson? Too much attached to him? Excuse me, dear, I do not understand you!"

Philomène then lost all precaution; after the first avowal, which had cost her something, she knew no more bounds, and she continued on the giddy descent of confessions, with the ever-increasing rapidity of a wagon that descends a slope by itself.

"Yes; I know very well that at my age it is ridiculous, and especially after having loved my poor husband so much. But it is not my fault, I have too loving a nature. I have not been spoiled in the way of affectionate words and kind treatment, and Masson has been so kind to me, so obliging, and has shown me so much affection, that I have not been able to resist it."

"My poor Philomène!" said Marie, who was dumb-founded, and felt pity for this strange passion, which, under stress of circumstances, might have had birth in the mind of a consolable widow.

"You have asked me why I have not had any appetite for two weeks: it is on account of this. I feel I am failing in health. I do not sleep at night. I know it is madness, and I have done everything I could to keep myself from it."

This was an audacious untruth. Never had Philomène, from her cradle, endeavored to hold herself back from any

abyss whatever; she had, on the contrary, sought with admirable persistency and lucidity every thing that might satisfy one of her desires or please one of her fancies, and only refused herself things when destiny, after several repetitions, made her at length realize that it did not intend to gratify her.

Marie kept silence, seeing which her cousin began to weep. Tears possess, among their other advantages, this one: that they oblige the witness of their grief to proffer marks of sympathy, from which otherwise she would probably have refrained. This manner of proceeding had its usual effect, for Madame Verroy leaned towards Philomène, and caressed her affectionately by tapping her on her shoulder. Madame Crépin buried her tear-covered, confused face deeper in her handkerchief.

"Come, Philomène, be reasonable; calm yourself," said the kind woman, taking her hand. But Philomène did not wish to be reasonable nor to calm herself, and her cousin took advantage of her agitation to reflect, during which time the current of her tears exhausted itself alone.

In Madame Verroy's upright mind, Madame Crépin's love for Masson was one of the most unfortunate things that could have happened to her. Incapable of understanding the mixture of ambition, of jealousy, of contemptible or bad feelings, that had presided at the birth and development of this fortuitous passion, she saw in it one of those unlucky accidents that are common to women who live without intellectual or moral occupation at the age that a clever novelist, who well understood women's hearts, has characterized as "the crisis."

"It is not the unhappy woman's fault," she said to herself; "she was alone, a widow, without children, and her modest competency even turned against her in taking from her the preoccupation of procuring her daily bread. Masson appeared to her like a sort of enchanter, a being from another world, and she loved him—foolishly—"

Yes; foolishly! It was impossible not to acknowledge this. A peasant woman, forty years old, endowed with a little common sense, would never have cast her eyes on an actor, a man of the world, several years younger than herself, and as little suited to her, as an old French saying goes, "as a silk stocking for an ox." Evidently Philomène had been wanting from first to last, in all the qualities of an intelligent woman. But what was there to do about it?

When Marie thought Philomène had wept sufficiently, she said to her:

"Come, what do you wish me to do? Would you like me to beg Masson to cease his visits here during the time that your business still retains you in Paris?"

As she was asking this question, the young woman said to herself that her cousin's business was not very important, and that it had lasted a long time; why had not the imprudent Philomène remedied the evil by taking flight at an opportune moment?

"Oh! no," exclaimed Madame Crépin, hastily; "he would guess why, and I would die of shame!"

"Not the least danger of it in the world," replied Marie; "it very often happens that we close our doors to

all our friends for a week or two, when Charles has some hurried work to finish, and no one asks any other explanation of our seclusion."

"No, no," Philomène murmured faintly, "do not prevent his coming here; I shall soon go away; I shall perhaps never see him again; let me do so while I am here: then it will be over!"

Madame Verroy thought all this very childish and very unworthy of a woman of her age, whose misfortunes should have protected her from such infatuations, but this poor Philomène fed herself on novels; it was but little astonishing, therefore, that her ideas should be romantic. However, she could not help saying to her:

"You would do better not to see him, since it cannot result in anything for you!"

Wounded to the quick, but still cunning as ever, the widow continued the attack from another side.

"I know very well that it can result in nothing," said she; "it is not necessary for you to make me realize my folly; the difference in age between us—five years—renders all idea of marriage ridiculous, I know; so don't distress yourself."

"Oh!" answered Marie, much annoyed; "it is not the difference in age; I know some very clever men who have married women, not five, but ten years older than themselves, and who are nevertheless perfectly happy."

"What hindrance is there, then, according to you?" asked Madame Crépin, in the state of mind of a cock who meets another on his own dung-heap.

"There is the difference of habits, of education, of surroundings!" said Marie, with a certain discouraged tone. It was decidedly becoming very difficult for her to make any ideas enter her cousin's head without saying disagreeable things to her.

"Alas!" replied Philomène, in a sweet and plaintive voice, "I know very well that I have not been brought up in a city, but as far as regards education, my cousin Charles has been very happy with you, and you knew no more than I do when you married him. Now, there is the question of fortune; but has not Masson said a hundred times that he would consider it the height of happiness to live at La Heuserie on a small income, just enough to make the two ends meet? It is the simplicity of his tastes that has influenced me in his favor. As I listened to him talking I said to myself: There is a man who has exactly my tastes and ideas—and that was another thing that attracted me towards him. And then he resembles my late husband so much. That is why I loved him at first sight!"

"Like Juliet with Romeo," thought Marie; the ridiculous part her cousin was acting in trying to justify herself in this way began to fill her with merriment that was but little in harmony with the occasion. "I cannot, however, tell her," she thought, "that we are going to try to marry her idol and Virginie! *Môn Dieu!* how furious she would be!"

Meanwhile she wished to end the scene, and she had a bright idea.

"Would you like me to speak to him about it?" said

Madame Verroy; "so that you might know what to expect?"

"No, no!" said Philomène, delighted, and shaking her head gently; "no, I beg of you, do not speak to him about it; if anything is to happen I prefer it should come from him."

This language was enigmatical but nevertheless clear.

"You mean to say that the proposal should come from him? However, as you have spoken to me about it, I might insinuate—"

Marie hoped in this way to obtain a means for sending her cousin back to her own fireside that had been too long abandoned. Once Masson should have cut short her matrimonial fancies, Philomène would hurry away, of course, to hide her disgrace at Diélette; but Madame Crépin, through having played too close a game, overthrew at once her own and Marie's wishes.

"No," said she, faintly; "let the proposal come from himself."

"You will have to wait a long time for it!" Marie thought, but as she had a very honest nature she did not once imagine that her "no" meant "yes," and she swore to Philomène as well as to herself that she would keep the most absolute silence about it.

Madame Crépin was dumbfounded at this most unhopèd-for result.

"You will not speak to him about it?" she said again, in a doubtful tone.

"I give you my word of honor I will not speak to him of it until you have betrayed yourself."

"Your word of honor?"

"You have it."

Philomène heaved a great sigh.

"Thanks," said she, for she was obliged to thank her, though greatly against her will.

Marie arose, heaving another sigh of relief this time. After all, she would be sure of sending her cousin home to her penates as soon as Masson's marriage would be arranged; it was only a question of a few more days now, and so she busied herself without delay about the preparations for her departure.

"Are you going away to-morrow?" Madame Crépin asked, whose eyes were completely dry.

"Yes."

"Far away?"

"No."

"Will you spend the night in the railway?"

"No, I shall arrive in the evening."

"Will you be long away?"

"I do not know."

"I do not understand how your husband can allow you to go away alone, in autumn, in such cold weather. He ought to go with you."

"He has something else to do. And then, it is necessary that some one should remain here, of course."

"I will be here!" said Philomène, proudly.

"I am much obliged, but it is impossible. By the way, during my absence Masson will take his meals here. It annoys me on your account, but it was arranged, and I could not foresee—"

"It does not matter, my dear," interrupted Philomène, beaming with delight; "I told you that you could not give me a greater pleasure than that of his society."

"All the better, then," said Marie, in that sort of bad humor both angry and resigned, that takes possession of us when we see an idiotic person determined to do himself harm, in spite of all we have done to prevent him. "Try to order them good dinners to console them."

"Does Masson need to be consoled for your absence?" said Madame Crépin, maliciously.

"Eh! eh! Who knows?" replied Marie, who was thinking of Virginie, and of the problematical result of her undertaking.

Her cousin gave her in an underhand way so black a look, that the young woman, without having directly perceived it, felt a disagreeable sensation run over her. But there was no use in looking at Philomène; her face bore her scrutiny without frowning, in a good-natured, indifferent way.

"Let them manage as they can," said she to herself, thinking of the two men. "The two together will be a strong enough party for her!"

When she at last found herself alone with her husband, that is to say, very late at night in their bed-room, she laid her hands on his shoulders, and looking him well in the face:

"Guess," said she to him, "the most surprising, the most marvellous, etc., etc., etc., news!"

"I never guess," said Charles, lazily.

"Must I tell it to you?"

"I advise you to do so, if you have the slightest desire I should know it."

"Philomène is in love!"

Verroy looked at his wife and burst out laughing, and covered his face with his hands in order to stifle it, on account of the existing circumstances.

"That antique turtle-dove!" said he. "Ah! that is splendid!"

"Do you know with whom?"

"With whom? Eh! *parbleu!* with Masson!"

"Who told you?" asked his wife, surprised.

"I never guess, but I observe. I did not believe our cousin capable of such stupidity, but if she is, it can only be with Masson. I have suspected it a hundred times. What a face he will put on when he knows it!"

"Don't tell him of it, I beg you; I have given my word of honor that he shall know nothing about it."

"Have you done so, at your age? Oh! Marie, I thought you had more common sense!"

"But when she besought me to do so!"

"It meant 'tell him,' I implore you!"

"Well, so much the worse! I promised, and I must keep my word."

"And then, he would be too much annoyed, the poor fellow! We will tell it to him when his marriage is arranged; he will have a consolation in his hands at least then, and he well deserves it. Philomène in love—who would have believed it! But it was sure to be; she loved her husband too much, not to love another afterwards on the first opportunity."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AN ENVOY PLENIPOTENTIARY.

THE next day, towards six o'clock in the evening, the train deposited Madame Verroy at a pretty, modest, primitive, whitewashed little station, that was in charge of some Burgundian officials, who were robust and ruddy, like people who inhabit a country where living is not dear, and where they drink their wine without water. One of these stalwart men received the small ticket which Marie presented him as she passed through the gate of a sort of poultry-yard fence, that protected the rights of the station from the invasion of the populace, and she found herself in the most complete solitude. A yellow omnibus with a sleepy horse was to be seen stationed near in the twilight, but no one seemed to trouble himself about her, and Madame Verroy went and sat in the omnibus to wait.

In about five minutes' time another Burgundian, as square of shoulders as the others, came out of a small *café* that bore a sign on which was pompously written in large letters *Café de la Gare*, the which seemed none the less asleep than all its surroundings. The man approached the omnibus, spoke to his horse, arranged the harness, and said :

"Well, my Coco, our duty is done; let us go to supper."

"Eh!" cried Marie, just as the good fellow was putting his foot on the first step of the breakneck ladder that led to the coachman's seat, that was as honorable as it was perilous.

"Some one!" said the other. "Excuse me, Madame, I did not see you. Are you going to X——?"

"And you?" asked the young woman.

"Coco and I are here expressly for that," said he, with a good, hearty laugh; "but we never have to carry many travellers there at this season, or at any other, for that matter. It is not far off, Madame."

And, effectively, a few minutes after, the so-called pavement of the small village was making Marie shake in the omnibus like a nut in its shell; and then the omnibus, with a great rattling of old iron, went under a *porte-cochère*, and stopped in front of a lighted window.

"Where are we?" Madame Verroy asked the brisk, tidy little maid, who came to open the omnibus door.

"At the hotel 'Du Pigeon d'Or,' Madame, at your service."

The Pigeon d'Or sheltered the railway station omnibus, which would have been an excellent thing for the hotel, did it ever bring any travellers in it; but as none ever came, its hosts lived quietly on the income that their vineyards brought them, dining well, supping better, never putting any water in their wine, and were not far from considering the arrival of any one whom they would be obliged to shelter as a domestic calamity which disturbed them in their comfortable tranquillity.

However, Marie looked so pleasant, and such cordiality seemed to emanate from her whole person, that the hostess unfrowned; and, finally, Madame Masson's name entirely brightened up her countenance.

"Eh! indeed, yes, I do know her, the good lady! Have you come to see her? You don't bring her any bad news, I hope?"

"None in the world," said Marie; "do I look like a bearer of evil tidings?"

"No, indeed! as to that. But, you see, excepting her son, who comes to see her sometimes, she never receives any visits. A long while ago, her brother, the late Abbé, often came here; but, since his death, the poor lady only sees the people of the place."

"Does she retire late?" asked the young woman, who was impatient to begin her campaign.

"She does not sleep much on account of her age; she goes to bed early, but as she does not sleep, if you would like to see her, nothing is easier; we will send and tell her you are going."

Marie thought for a moment, then she wrote on a visiting card: "Madame Verroy, whom Madame Masson, doubtless, knows by name, is passing through the town, and would like to see her, so as to give her some news of her son, whom she saw in good health yesterday in Paris."

This message was carried by a curly-headed boy, who returned galloping and out of breath, and communicated to Marie the result of his errand in this succinct form:

"Come at once."

"Without taking your supper!" exclaimed the hostess, clasping her hands, on a level with her nose, which every one knows expresses deep desolation.

"I will take my supper when I return," said the young woman, smiling; "*à tantôt.*"

The hostess was much annoyed, thinking that the supper would simmer for an hour; two hours, who knew? perhaps longer, on the ashes! But as her husband remarked to her: "Our trade demands it!" she joined the worthy man in the dining-room, where a savory *ragoût* was smoking.

Conducted by the curly-headed boy, Marie soon reached a small house, preceded by a little parterre, that was ornamented with a large silvered glass ball, placed on an old moss-covered stone pedestal, that formed the drollest contrast with it. This ball was a present from Masson, who, going through the Palais Royal one day, stopped before it, saying to himself: "I have never seen anything as frightful as that; I am going to send it to mamma. She will be delighted with it." Which he did then and there.

Marie entered the house. A young servant-maid led her to a bed-room, that was furnished in old-fashioned style, with an alcove-bed hung with very old, light-gray-colored damask; the wall-paper was bright; the rococo arm-chairs offered their twisted arms to those of the visitor; and a handsome new lamp, the last present from an absent son, illuminated the rosy, tranquil face of an old

lady, who had regular features, hair as white as silver, and who half rose to salute the new-comer.

"You do not bring me bad news, I hope, Madame?" said she, in a feeble voice, that was still young and very sweet.

"On the contrary," said Marie, approaching.

The smiling eyes and the young woman's frank manner inspired Madame Masson with confidence immediately; but a fresh alarm embittered her new trust.

"I do not remember your name," said she, scrutinizing her visitor's face and clothes, while her hands rested on the arms of her chair.

"You know my husband's better, doubtless; your son calls him Charles, and he passed a month with us this summer in Normandy."

"Ah! you are Charles' wife!" exclaimed the old lady, becoming reassured, and letting herself fall back on the cushion that supported her shoulders. "I am very glad to see you. Tell me, is my son well?"

"Very well; he sent you a thousand tender messages!"

"Why did he not come?"

"He acts every night."

"Yes, and he imperils his soul every night the more! Ah! my poor boy! If he would only have listened to me, he would have been the Curé of our parish by this time, and it would have been he who would have prepared his poor infirm mother for a better life."

"He had no vocation for it," said Marie, unable to

suppress a smile; "he is thinking of something quite different now; and that is why I have come here."

"What?" said his mother, drawing herself up, "he wishes to marry? To wed an adventures? An actress?"

No words could render the indignant, contemptuous, alarmed accent that Madame Masson gave those words: "an actress!" The very serpent, which it is said tempted our mother Eve, could not have inspired her with more horror.

Seeing the ice was broken, Marie plunged bravely into the middle of her story.

"You have guessed rightly, Madame," said she; "he wishes to marry."

"Never, never!" the old lady exclaimed, wounded in her maternal pride. "Never will I call one of those shameless creatures, who dishonor our sex, my daughter! You can tell him I refuse my consent. He can well wait until I am dead, before he inflicts this shame on me; he will not have long to wait."

"We will speak about it presently," said Marie, gently. "Now, I wish to tell you something else, but as the story is a little long, you will pardon me if I begin at the beginning."

Madame Masson, who was still trembling with indignation, settled herself again in her arm-chair and fixed her penetrating eyes on Marie's face.

"I must tell you," began the young woman, "that at Dicielette, where we were this summer and where your son came to join us, we had an adventure. We have as a

neighbor there an elderly lady, named Madame Aubier, who is an excellent woman and whom we all love very much."

"I know," said Madame Masson; "my son wrote me about her."

"He did well; I am sure that if you knew her, you would love her also. One day, or rather one afternoon, she set out to make us a visit, was taken on the road with an attack of asthma and nearly suffocated."

"Asthma is very dangerous," said the old lady; "my brother, the Abbé, died of it; he used some drops that were a sovereign remedy for that illness. You cannot imagine the marvellous cures they have made; I will give you the receipt for your friend."

Marie thanked her, saying to herself the while that the sovereign drops ought to have prevented the Abbé from dying.

"Madame Aubier," she continued, "was fortunately not alone when the attack seized her; she was accompanied by a charming young girl, her goddaughter, who is very fond of her, and who passes every year a part of the summer with her. Virginie—she is called Virginie—did all she could at first for her, and then brought her to our house; my husband and your son hastened to accompany our good friend to her home; the distance was long, and a little before reaching there the poor woman fainted, and the two gentlemen carried her to her dwelling and we were all obliged to pass the night at Diçlette."

"My son has been well brought up by his mother,"

said Madame Masson, proudly; "he knows what is due to an aged and respectable woman. I am glad to see that the bad life he has lived has not stifled all honest feelings in his heart."

"I assure you, dear Madame, that your son is as good a man as your maternal heart could desire; few mothers have such sons. You are well aware of it, however, for he does not prove his affection to you simply in words."

The old lady acquiesced by a nod with her head, and Marie continued her story.

"It would be impossible to tell you, dear Madame, what touching care the young girl lavished on her godmother: no daughter ever cared for or loved her mother better. Virginie Beuron is not at all an ordinary person; although her father is a simple farmer, a country landowner, and gave his only child but a seminary education, she has I know not what charm, or rather I do well know what is the charm of the purity and virginal modesty, that makes her the most attractive person in the world."

"She does not need to know so much in order to be an accomplished woman," said Madame Masson, with dignity; "when I married I scarcely knew how to read or write. I learned what I know from habit and from the necessity of busying myself with my affairs and my housekeeping. Later, on account of my son, I have read works—works of another kind."

Marie's eyes asked in what these works differed from those which Madame Masson did not mention. The old lady pointed to a small library, where, if it had been

lighter, might have been seen all the modern and classical plays in which Masson had taken a part since he entered the Conservatoire. As she did not understand, the matron added :

"They are the plays, in which my son has taken part."

Within herself, Marie admired the devoted mother, who could not help procuring for herself the works of damnation in which her son lost his soul ; but at the bottom of her conscience did she really think him so culpable, or did she only persist in an opinion she had formerly expressed, when under the influence of a more rigid way of thinking ? This the young woman never knew.

"I return to our adventure," continued Marie, smiling ; "this young girl, as I have said, won all our hearts, and it was a real *fête*-day for us when she came to see us ; her godmother's illness deprived us of her visits, and we got into the way of going to see her almost every day—your son went with us, of course—and what was strange, Madame Aubier became so fond of him, that his departure was a great sorrow to her."

"The poor woman !" said Madame Masson, with complacency.

"Two months have since passed, and we have just heard that a person living at Diélette, a man forty years old, possessing a very modest fortune, and a character that can be but little recommended, as far as we could judge, has asked for, and almost obtained, Virginie's hand. Imagine our sorrow !"

"Why does he wish to marry this young person ?" said the old lady, much interested.

"Because she has some money! She has eighteen hundred francs income in government securities, and for that man ready money is a desirable thing, as he wishes to use it to pay his debts!"

"Is it in three per cents.?"

"No, in five."

Madame Masson meditated for a moment.

"It is very interesting," said she, after a silence, "but I do not see very clearly what my son has to do with all this?"

"It is Virginie Beuron whom your son loves and desires to marry," concluded Marie, with truly meritorious modesty.

Madame Masson leaned a little forward, examined the young woman's face attentively, then let herself sink backward, with a slight sigh, and kept silence.

The moment when a mother hears that her son is seriously thinking of founding a family for himself, and separating himself irrevocably from the maternal nest, is always a painful one. So long as he is not married, she may secretly hope, with that egotism that is the foundation of almost all love, that he will remain a bachelor, and will come to pass with her those years of rest that men are obliged to take when they have established their lives and are growing old.

If the son—who is always clung to more closely by the mother than the father—thinks of marrying, the first maternal desire is to find that the young girl possesses a great number of faults, so that to withhold her consent

may be an act of wisdom. With what triumphant sweetness does she then refuse to favor a union that will give her child unhappiness! Never will she have loved him so much as at this very moment, when she is sending him to despair.

But when the marriage is acceptable, the young girl without reproach, then the mother's heart—which is obliged by reason to accept an end that all desire—suffers with an indescribable bitterness; she experiences the same feelings as a sovereign who abdicates—she does, in effect, abdicate, and not in favor of her son, but rather for a stranger who often is hated for this cause, without having deserved it, and which in fact cannot be surprising, so natural is it to our weak nature.

Madame Verroy read all these feelings on the old woman's wrinkled face, and she waited patiently till the new idea had made its way. After a long meditation, Madame Masson raised her eyes, which she had kept cast down, and said, in a simple way:

“If I refuse, what will happen?”

“Your son will remain at the theatre, which he likes but little, and will try to console himself by those distractions that are peculiar to that mode of life.”

The old lady shrugged her shoulders with a movement of anger.

“If you accept,” continued the ambassadress, “and if you consent to give him a little help, he will leave his theatrical career forever.”

“Will he do that?” exclaimed his mother, with youthful vivacity.

"I assure you he will!"

Marie then entered into a thousand material details: she explained how father Beuron would never accept as his son-in-law any man who had not a fortune equivalent, at least, to his daughter's; and that, moreover, Masson, leaving the theatre, and having no hope of enriching himself rapidly by the sale of his water-color drawings, could not live entirely at his wife's expense.

"But, Madame!" interrupted Madame Masson, proudly, "my son is rich! I have six thousand francs income, of which I only spend the third; this house belongs to me, and I have no other heir!"

She stopped, and then added almost immediately:

"I have always intended to give my son four thousand francs income, in government securities in five per cents., Madame, on the day he would leave the theatre. I have begged him enough to do it, *mon Dieu!* but I had my trouble for nothing. It seems that Mademoiselle Virginie has not had as much difficulty in obtaining what he has always obstinately refused me!"

"She does not know that he loves her," said Marie, gently.

"Ah!" said Madame Masson, with a certain respectful tone. "And he—does he know that he is loved?"

"He hopes so." Here Marie related Lavenel's pursuit, the young girl's despairing letter, and what Madame Aubier had done. "You can," said she, in conclusion, "do both of them a great deal of good, or a great deal of harm, according as you will be favorable or not to their plans."

For it is on yourself alone that their happiness depends, as there is no doubt that father Beuron will consent to replace an old son-in-law, with but little money, with another who is young, amiable and richer."

This Machiavelian phrase touched a sensitive chord in the old lady's heart, for she smiled without replying.

Then: "We will talk of it again," said she. "I must think it over."

"I will return to-morrow," said Marie, rising, "and you will tell me what you have decided."

"If only he had come himself," said Madame Masson, who felt a desire for finding fault with some one. "It would have been polite, respectful; but young men—"

"He did not dare to do so, dear Madame! Nothing could be more respectful than that fear of displeasing you!"

A smile of satisfaction broke upon the old lady's lips, and Marie saw that she had won the game.

The next morning Madame Masson made some objections, but rather for form's sake than anything else. In reality, the idea of having her son leave the theatre delivered her from so much pain, and removed from her so heavy a weight, that she had carried for such a long time, that the sorrow of having a daughter-in-law could not be compared to it. And then, this daughter-in-law was a simple girl, ignorant of cities and their abominations; but what a misfortune that he had not rather chosen a girl from her country! However, on looking at this last question a little nearer, Madame Masson had not been able to

discover one that suited her, which was not astonishing, for Virginie herself would have had difficulty in finding grace in her eyes had she lived in her town. An old proverb says: "No one is a prophet in his own country." Alas! the smaller the country, the more difficult is it to pass for a prophet in it.

The night train bore Madame Verroy to Paris, provided with an authorization in good form, allowing Masson to propose for Virginie Beuron and to marry her—the said Masson being able to prove a personal fortune of four thousand francs income, in governmental securities in five per cents.!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

SUCCESS!

MARIE had not written since her departure, and had telegraphed still less. Sure of the success of her mission, she wished to give herself the pleasure of enjoying Masson's delight in all its freshness. She arrived about mid-day, went immediately to her house, and entered the dining-room, where the two friends were breakfasting together, bachelor fashion, and were consoling themselves very agreeably for her absence with oysters and a partridge.

"Another dozen, Julie!" cried Charles to the maid, on seeing his wife enter.

Very pale, Masson stood up, holding his chair in his hands, and looked at Marie, without daring to speak; the young woman held the stamped paper towards him, saying, "It is done."

The poor fellow let his chair fall, caught Madame Verroy by her shoulders and impressed two great kisses on her cheeks, after which he released her, covered with shame, and in manner of excuse, turned towards Charles, saying to him:

"It was not my fault; I was too happy."

"Don't restrain yourself, my friend; continue," said Verroy, quite calmly: "she will pass them on to me."

For five minutes there ensued a volley of questions and answers that were quite incomprehensible; however, it seemed every one obtained the information he wanted, for suddenly a great silence of satisfaction came over our three happy friends. Instinctively, Marie turned her head towards the door, of which some one touched the knob. To her great surprise, the maid entered bringing the oysters.

"Well! where is Philomène?" asked the young woman.

"Philomène! She asks where Philomène is!" exclaimed Charles, bursting out laughing and throwing himself back in his chair. "I say, Masson, she asks where is Philomène!"

Masson, who laughed also, but more sedately, drew out his watch and answered:

"She must be reaching Diélette at this very moment."

Marie turned towards Charles to ask an explanation, but he, entirely given over to his joy, was rubbing his hands together, and seemed in ecstasy.

"It is a surprise I had for you," said he to his wife. "In case you should be obliged to return unsuccessful, it was to be a compensation, and if you were to bring good news, it was to be the reward you deserved. I selected one for you after my own heart; do you not like it?"

"Certainly, yes," Marie answered, gained over by the two friends' hilarity. "But how did you do it?"

"I told her that Lavenel wished to get married—and not to herself!"

"And she left?"

"Immediately! Fearing to be late, she waited two hours at the station for the departure of the train."

"Well! but you?" said the young woman, inconsiderately, turning towards Masson.

"I?"

"Yes; what do you say about it?" added she, remembering her imprudent promise.

"I say that unless she had left we would neither have had oysters nor partridges—draw the conclusion yourself."

"I swore," said Charles, "that she should never eat oysters in our house; she talked about them every day; it was a fixed idea of hers; so, as soon as she left, I ordered some. It was very simply done."

They had to go over all the details of the negotiation, for Masson could not hear enough of them. He looked at the precious paper that assured his life's happiness to him, with the eyes of an amateur who has found a rarity; he would have liked to have started at once, in two different directions, for Diélette and for X——, in order to see his mother and Virginie simultaneously.

"My mother is indeed very good," said he, at length; "for since fifteen years I have never given her anything but pain."

"Reassure yourself," Madame Verroy answered him; "she has certainly had some sorrowful hours, but she has also had some very sweet ones as well; her devotion and her maternal pride have fought some terrible combats, but pride was conqueror."

She then told him about the episode of the library,

where, on the day following the memorable evening, she had discovered in it a number of profane works, become sacred ones because her loved son had taken a part in the plays they contained!

"My good mother!" said Masson, overcome; "before going to Virginie, I shall go to kiss and thank you."

"Nothing will give her more happiness," said Marie.

"And then," added Charles, "it will be a good example for your children—when you have any."

The afternoon was entirely spent in the composition of a letter to father Beuron, and another to Madame Aubier, in which the former was to be enclosed. When the work was finished to their general satisfaction, Masson took the letter to carry it to the post himself, but Charles stopped him.

"A letter is all very well," said he; "but the question will never be ended—we must send a telegram."

"A long telegram, then, so that it will be clear."

"Enormous! I will take charge of it; moreover literature is my business, and you know nothing about it. Well! and Philomène: are you not going to write to her?" added he.

"Write to her! Why?"

"Don't open your eyes as wide as that! To give her pleasure!"

"Would that please her?"

"She would be in ecstasy. Imagine an artist who acts in plays!"

"Next year, then," said Masson; "now I have not the time."

He left, and towards ten o'clock in the evening the whole theatre was struck with the martial and triumphant tone in which he uttered the words: "By heaven! my lords, you have done a sorry task!"

He was so grand, that a salvo of applause was bestowed on him by the enthusiasts in the parterre and the galleries to such a degree, that the people in the *fauteuils* and balconies joined in it without knowing why; even the "*claque*" applauded gratis, which, as every one knows, never happens, except when everybody has lost his head.

It was the first and the last time that the rôle of "Monseigneur, the Duke," had an ovation. The play was only given five times more, and since then it has fallen into oblivion—oblivion that is worse than death, so poets and dramatic authors say.

CHAPTER XXXV.

PARIS FASHIONS.

WHILE Masson, who was bewildered at a success he had not in the least foreseen, was asking himself whether he had not a rabbit's tail or some other extraordinary object hanging in the middle of his back, in order to explain to himself his wonderful reception, Philomène, seated before her cold fireside in her house that had become damp from having been shut up, was *en tête-à-tête* with a second-rate candle, that was dripping with all its might, and was saying to herself, that life was absurd, people all stupid, her cousin bad, and Lavenel an idiot.

This litany consoled her; but it was one of those things that possess a virtue only by being repeated—at least, we must believe so; for she was not happy until she had said and re-said it ten times and more.

It was all very well to be a proprietor in a town like Diélette, to have a house to one's self on a square, in the finest situation, to possess a great many curiosities, brought home from lands beyond the seas by a Captain. The Captain's being dead was perhaps an advantage, but in certain circumstances it might also be a disadvantage, and at the present moment Philomène knew not what to decide about it. If the Captain had been alive, and if his unlucky star had willed that he should have been ashore,

under analogous circumstances, she would probably have sent him to call her cousin Charles to account. But the Captain was a clever fellow—although he had not given proof of it in marrying Philomène; and, doubtless, he would have contented himself by going to present his compliments to his cousin, in order to have had an opportunity of smoking a good cigar and enjoying a little glass “of something good” with him.

It was very fine to possess so many nice things, and a little garden, and a dress with a train—a present from Marie—and two or three hundred francs’ worth of gifts shut up in her heavy trunk, and a travelling-bag, bought in the “Passage du Havre.” (Philomène had recognized by this time the social inferiority of game-baskets.) But what was all that in comparison to what she had lost?—her pleasant Paris life—the *far niente* of days spent in reading novels or in taking walks—the good food—being waited upon by servants—and above all, Masson’s presence, and the hopes she cherished about him!

Philomène’s return to Diélette was in no degree a triumphal entrance. She arrived there on a cold day at the end of October, in a pouring rain. The yellow diligence deposited her and her effects on the square. Only after great trouble would the driver, who had drunk a little drop, consent to drag her trunk as far as her door; and he left her with some rough, joking remarks to her, that were but little in keeping with Madame Crépin’s new pretensions. The irreverent *gamins*, who happened just then to be at liberty, as it was the hour of their

repast, did not deprive themselves of a laugh, and the widow's threatenings had no other effect on them than to redouble their merriment. Hardly had she entered her house when the mouldy smell, that is proper to *rez-de-chaussées* that have been closed for a long time, nearly stifled her, and Philomène was obliged to confess to herself that her dwelling could not bear any comparison to Madame Verroy's apartment, which fact was another source of bitterness to her.

After a short space of time, consecrated to the embellishment of her person, Madame Crépin went out to make a few visits. Too prudent to give occasion for indiscreet commentaries, she began with two or three indifferent friends, if these two words may be united. In order to dazzle her society, and to inspire from the beginning those whom she honored with a visit with new respect, she had put on a cloak made in the last fashion, a present from her cousin, and her handsomest bonnet. But the effect this display produced was exactly opposite to that which she had hoped.

"Oh, what a droll cloak!" said her first friend to her. "Is that the fashion in Paris, to bind one's self up in clothes like that? I don't know, but it seems to me if I were in your place I would be ashamed to let my legs be so plainly seen under my dress!"

At her second visit, it was her bonnet that found no grace in the eyes of a judge who was equally severe, so that Philomène was not in the most brilliant humor when she presented herself at Madame Aubier's.

The latter received her as though she had never left Diélette; however, a sort of coldness was apparent in her welcome. Although she was in reality innocent of Lavenel's freak, still, if Philomène had remained at home, the old gallant would not have carried his devotions elsewhere.

Madame Aubier confined herself, however, to questioning her about her travels, and the widow took a long while in saying over the rosary of her delights. Masson's name was introduced so often, and so naturally in her story, that the old lady finally said to her :

"Did you see him, then, very often?"

"Almost every day," replied the half-consoled Artemesia.

"Is he well?"

"Very well; I have never seen so amiable or so good-tempered a man."

Madame Aubier sighed. Was her little Virginie already forgotten? She asked herself, if she did right in confiding the secret of her young heart to friends of such recent date, and to a young man who had, perhaps, become quite indifferent to her.

"He took me to the theatre," Philomène continued, blushing with pride, "he showered kindnesses upon me, and he came to see me when I was alone in order to amuse me. Ah! he is a well brought-up young man, and one who has a deal of heart! His greatest desire is to settle in our country, and I would not be astonished if some day or other he should marry a woman from this place."

The old lady looked Philomène full in the face, in order to try to penetrate her thoughts. Could Madame Verroy by any chance and contrary to all probabilities have made a confidante of her cousin? The widow's modest blushes and self-assurance calmed the anxiety of Virginie's god-mother on that point immediately, but another idea entered her mind: Philomène seemed very happy— Could Masson?—But the absurdity of such a thought seized Madame Aubier so strongly that she could not help smiling.

"There is nothing to laugh at in that," said the widow, bitterly; "my cousin Charles took his wife from Granville; we are not more uncivilized here than at Granville, I presume!"

"Oh! no; on the contrary," replied Madame Aubier, with increasing merriment.

"Moreover," continued Philomène, "there would be nothing surprising in the fact, that a young man like Monsieur Masson should prefer a serious woman, as a contrast to his mode of life; people who live a great deal in the world, you know, like to have their own homes tranquil; he would love a little, quiet home—"

"Without children?" said the old lady.

"Yes, without children—they make a noise; he would like a serious woman, not one of those young girls who always wish to be in love. Monsieur Masson is a good fellow; have you never remarked how much he resembles my late husband?"

"Never!" said Madame Aubier, scarcely able to contain herself.

“The resemblance is astonishing! Therefore, I felt an affection for him immediately, the first time I met him; and then, he is so well-bred!”

The old lady felt the necessity of making a diversion, for she was no longer mistress of herself and feared to burst out laughing.

“Have you seen Lavenel?” said she, without any oratorical preliminaries.

“No,” said she, “I have not seen him. What is he doing?”

“I do not know; I suppose he is busy with his affairs.”

Madame Crépin reflected for an instant; then with the tact that characterized her she said to herself that Madame Aubier was not a gossip; that she might ask her a few questions without running the risk of having them carried around the village.

“I have been told that he is seeking to marry a young girl; is it true?”

“I have heard something to that effect,” replied the impassible old lady, “that he is seeking some one, but it is not a young girl.”

Philomène opened her eyes wide.

“The person has been named to me,” continued Madame Aubier, while her visitor tried to divine the chosen one’s name without succeeding; “and I have indeed no reason for hiding from you that it was yourself.”

“Ah! I! What an idea,” said Madame Crépin, annoyed beyond all possibility with this unforeseen conclusion.

“I will not hide from you,” continued the pitiless

matron, "that it has been a great deal talked about, and that I was anxious to have you return, so as to put an end to those rumors by a good marriage. The reputation of widows is as fragile as that of young girls, and perhaps even more so. Besides, you are right to have accepted him; it is a good match for you—"

"It is just as good for any one else," Philomène murmured in the sullen tone that was one of her charms; "if it was for this that my cousin disturbed me—"

"What!" exclaimed Madame Aubier, who had, however, heard very well, "do you not wish it? Is this plan only simple gossip, by any chance? You must take Lavenel to task for the harm he has done your reputation, for I can assure you, it was he who has talked about it to everybody. There is no one who does not know of it."

"But, Madame Aubier, you must be mistaken; is there not some other marriage on hand?"

"They have not spoken to me of any other," said the old lady, crossing her hands on her knees with a quiet air; she said nothing untrue, for they had written to her about it.

Philomène remained thoughtful; her mind was losing itself in a maze of suppositions that were equally disagreeable. Some one was making sport of her. Was it Madame Aubier, her cousin Verroy, Lavenel, or all of them together? As she raised her head:

"Why, you have left off your mourning!" said the old lady, maliciously.

Alas! it was only too true! A bow of garnet-colored

velvet bloomed on her bonnet, and another one, similar to it, at the widow's throat; this red was not very red: one might have declared it brown—but after all, brown is not mourning, nor even half-mourning. Philomène felt she was taken in fault; but she did not remain in that position long.

"It is a kind of violet they are wearing now in Paris," said she, with assurance.

"It is an odd violet," observed Madame Aubier. "I do not believe the fashion will take here; it resembles red too much for half-mourning."

Madame Crépin, who was rather discouraged, retired without even thinking of asking about Virginie.

In order to have her mind set at ease, she went towards her future husband's dwelling; this enigma had to be solved. As she entered the shop, Madame Lavenel gave her a little, cold bow; then she rose and went towards her, without showing any desire to kiss her, and then offered her a chair.

"You have returned, then!" said she; "we did not expect you so soon."

"Ah!" said Philomène, stiffly; "does my return surprise you?"

"Not exactly; you were obliged to return some day or other."

"Ah!" said the widow, in the same manner.

The two women looked out of the window into the street for some little time; but as the spectacle presented nothing very interesting to them, they ceased their con-

temptation almost at the same moment, and their looks met, full of secret hostility, which brought upon their respective faces the falsest of amiable smiles.

"My son is absent," said the mother.

"Ah!" repeated our sweet friend for the third time.

"He went away on some business affairs."

"To Pieux?" asked the *fiancée*, who had taken care to assure herself in the morning as she passed through the town, that no Lavenel whatever had appeared on the horizon of Pieux that day.

The delinquent's mother was not a woman who allowed herself to be taken by surprise. She thought Philomène had probably made inquiries there, and answered:

"No, in the direction of Flamanville."

It was in an opposite direction; Madame Crépin had nothing to say, and she said nothing. How should she catch that cunning woman, whom sixty years of craftiness had made impervious to all surprises?

"How are our friends here?" asked she, hoping to read some sign on Madame Lavenel's face, as she pronounced the names of families who had marriageable daughters. But it was lost trouble; she did not think of Virginie, who lived far enough off not to be considered an inhabitant of Diélette, and the old woman deserved no merit whatever in answering all her questions calmly.

After having exhausted the list of girls whom a man like Lavenel might aspire to marry, Madame Crépin took breath. Decidedly, it was not going to be an easy task, and she thought she would have done better to have

remained in Paris. What inconsiderate impulse had urged her to leave? Would it not have been better to have awaited Marie's return, and the result of some decisive meeting with Masson?

Yes, but marriage with Masson was still in an Utopian state; it was a golden dream, but only a dream, whilst Lavenel's betrayal was a reality, unless it were a mystification. In that case, Verroy was the last of men to have thus played with Philomène's too confiding heart.

"How are affairs going on?" asked Madame Crépin, in order to establish a bridge between herself and Madame Lavenel, who, for the moment, seemed to her like a steep and unattainable island, which she would be imprudent to abandon.

"Badly!" replied Lavenel's worthy mother, laconically.

Badly! Then, certainly, Verroy was not wrong. Never during the time when she desired Philomène as her daughter-in-law, had affairs gone badly; there must, then, be a complete change in the old woman's feelings, to have brought about this avowal or untruth.

"Badly? Have they become worse since my departure?" said the outraged *fiancée*.

"A great deal!"

"If you have need of a little money," Madame Crépin hastened to say, "I have a few hundred francs at your disposition."

"Have your bills been paid you?" said the old lady with an absent look fixed on her prospective daughter-in-law's garnet-colored velvet.

"No, but I have a little hoard, nevertheless."

"Ah!" observed Madame Lavenel, "you have very good luck," and she sighed deeply.

Silence came at this word, and Philomène felt powerless to revive the conversation. Disconcerted, she rose.

"Till one of these days," said she.

"*Au revoir*," replied the old woman. For which reason, Madame Crépin, sitting alone in the evening in her damp dwelling, *en tête-à-tête* with her chimney that persisted in smoking abominably, abandoned herself to sombre-colored thoughts, and to a general antipathy to the human species.

Just as she was going to bed, in default of any other consolation, a well-known step resounded heavily on the deserted square. She listened; it was Lavenel! Was he coming to see her? Was he glad she had returned? She had almost a moment of friendly feeling for her betrothed, of whom she had thought so little the day before, because he was bringing a welcome to her in her loneliness. The steps died away. Théodore, after having put up his horse and carriage, was, going home without thinking of her; however, he saw a candle burning in his future wife's window. This unusual light ought to have informed him of her return; but he went by, indifferently.

Philomène could no longer contain herself. She sprang like a cat from whom one takes her progeny, drew the bolt with an astonishing rapidity, and standing on her threshold, cried out into the night:

"Lavenel!"

Lavenel did not, or would not, hear. She made one bound into the street, caught her *fiancé* by the arm, and dragged him into the house.

They found themselves face to face in the light, or, rather, in the candle's smoky light, that chiefly illumined the end of their noses, an organ with which nature had too amply endowed both of them. Their faces assumed enormous and grotesque proportions in the strange light; Lavenel's prune-like eyes became black and bottomless abysses, and the cavities of Philomène's absent teeth formed irregular designs on her half-open lips, that were trembling with anger; and their two gigantic shadows, thrown on the wall and ceiling, were looking motionless at each other, like two monstrous faience griffins, ready to devour each other, on the steps of some stairway.

Lavenel, feeling the necessity of putting himself in countenance, wet his thumb and forefinger on his lips, and delicately taking the candle-wick between them, snuffed it with much dexterity, and wiping his hand mechanically on his trowsers, re-assumed his immobility. Philomène did not seem touched by this attention, and her ex-lover felt that the case was grave.

"Who are you going to marry, then, Lavenel?" said the offended woman.

The thrust was a rude one, but her adversary was cunning.

"It seems to me," said he, "you ought to know something about it."

Philomène, with an energetic movement of her head,

indicated that she considered herself as a disinterested party in the question, and Lavenel made a gesture in reply that signified: "Well, then, what do you wish me to say to you?"

"I know," said she, using an old procedure that succeeds nine times out of ten.

"Why do you ask, then?"

"To hear you say it."

Lavenel expressed by a gesture of his left hand that this desire seemed futile to him; but he kept silent.

"Speak, then!" exclaimed Philomène, exasperated.

"It is not worth while, since you have some idea that you do not tell me, and you get offended at what I say to you."

Without stopping to notice that he said nothing distinctly, Madame Crépin measured her adversary's strength in her mind, and took another tactic.

"When shall we be married?" said she, in a cross tone, that contrasted strangely with those words that were so full of sweet hopes.

"When you choose," Lavenel replied, with perfect indifference.

"Would you like our banns to be published on Sunday?"

"Sunday? It is Saturday to-day, and the Town Hall is closed; next Sunday, if you choose."

Philomène glanced at him slyly. He looked like a whipped dog, but he did not refuse. What, then, was all this surprising mystery? She passed her hand over her

brow, and feared for a moment to find a crack in her own brain, that had always been so well organized before.

"Very well," said she, with a sigh, "next Sunday."

"Remember, Philomène," said her *fiancé* to her, as he turned towards the door, "it is you who request it; I am not the one who is in a hurry. If something happens, it will not be my fault."

"Something!—what?" said the alarmed widow.

"A great many things may happen! You did not wish me to speak to people about our marriage; you went to Paris; you returned without giving any warning, and you wish to get married as soon as you arrive, without giving people time even to know where they are. All that is very fine, and, if I refused, you would say, perhaps, I had other reasons for so doing. We will arrange it as you say; but if you have any unpleasantness, it will not be my fault."

"How?" asked Madame Crépin, who was stunned by so long and so extraordinary a speech. "What do you mean to say?"

"I mean to say, that you were in love with the actor, and that you went to Paris to try and get him; you could not catch him, and so you came back here; but that is no reason why you should try to quarrel with honest people, when it is they, perhaps, who should reproach you."

"I in love with an actor! What actor?" said Philomène, with a foot thick of blushes on her face.

"Your cousin's friend—the one who drew houses on paper all last summer. For all you tried to hide it,

you could not help speaking of him on every occasion, and you have been seen to change color when he was amiable to your cousin or some other person. Now, you wish to marry me, that is very well ; but, remember, it is you who have asked it, and remember, also, that after your journey, which time you have employed, no one knows how, I could have every right to refuse."

"My journey ! Refuse ! You are mad, Lavenel !"

"On the contrary, I see very clearly. You ought to be ashamed to have lost your head for a man younger than yourself. And, as to him, he must be very silly to have taken any notice of your airs."

"He !" exclaimed Philomène, impelled by a desire to save her reputation, that was in danger, "he did not think of me !"

"And of whom, then ? You were always together."

A wicked smile passed over the widow's face. She felt she was about to revenge herself for a thousand humiliations.

"He was paying attention to my cousin," said she.

Lavenel looked at her severely. He was a shrewd, selfish man, without any delicacy ; but he was not wicked.

"You are bad, Madame Crépin," said he to her, in a reproachful tone. "What you say is not true, and were it so, your duty would be to hide it, and not to repeat it. Good-evening ; we will have time enough to see each other to-morrow."

He went away, while Philomène, who was amazed,

asked herself if some one had not changed her Lavenel. He spoke quite a different language the preceding spring.

"There is some woman underneath all this," she murmured between her teeth, "and if I can find her out, she shall pay me for this dearly."

A coarse laugh, that broke the silence of the night, was heard on the square, and a rude voice cried :

"You are in a hurry, Lavenel ! Here is your sweetheart, returned only this morning, and you could not restrain yourself from going to see her as you came home !"

Lavenel answered some words in a sullen voice, that Madame Crépin could not seize ; then she softly opened her door, just as the interlocutor continued in the same tone :

"It is true then, that you are hunting two hares at once ! One sees you during the day at father Beuron's, and at night at the widow Crépin's !"

"Go to the devil !" Lavenel growled, loud enough to be heard by all the villagers who were not yet asleep.

He went off, and Philomène let her door close on her fingers, but she did not care. Virginie Beuron ! She had never dreamed of that little girl. It was too idiotic to be true ! With this consoling thought, she went to bed, and had abominable dreams, in which Lavenel, Virginie and Masson were all making sport of her, in the most unseemly manner.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A TELEGRAM.

LAVENEL had parried the first thrust, in promising only a brief delay in the publication of the banns; but it was only a palliative: he would have to decide on some heroic step. Now Lavenel had nothing of the hero about him, and extreme measures cost him a great deal, for he liked to keep a back door open for himself. He could not marry two women at once, and the situation became embarrassing.

He had for Virginie no other feeling than the desire to touch her nice little *dot* of sounding crowns—but he had determined to marry her, and the idea suited him well enough. As to his old love, Philomène still inspired him with the same complex mixture of anger, former passion, disdain and rancor; only since she had endeavored to blacken her cousin's reputation, he despised her a little more, and since he had accused her of the love he supposed she felt for Masson, he desired all the more to have her for his wife, so that he could revenge himself on her for a long series of mortifications and jealousies of various kinds.

At night, when all alone *en tête-à-tête* with his cotton night-cap—for night-caps may be found in our provinces, in daily use—Lavenel went over in his mind all his griefs against Philomène.

"She is a silly woman," said he to himself; "she has nothing but vanity in her head, and selfishness in her heart; and now, here she comes to upset me in my plans. Would she not have done better—"

What ought she to have done that would have been better?

Here Theodore Lavenel's tormented mind embarked on another ocean of perplexities. To have married Masson? Philomène was alone capable of considering Masson as a husband suited to her: the rest of human kind could but have been amused at such a thought, and their amusement would have been troubled by a kind of consternation at the sight of her aberration of mind that was intensely absurd. And besides, should Lavenel marry Virginie, he would never have forgiven any being whatsoever for having deprived him of Philomène a second time—he wished her to remain a widow and that no new honey-moon whatever should illumine her solitary hearth.

They say that the dog in the manger experiences an analogous feeling; but at least, the honest dog fulfils the mission which his master has allotted to him, whereas Lavenel fulfilled no mission whatever, except that of pleasing himself, and until now he had acquitted himself of it admirably.

Then, what should Madame Crépin have done in order to avoid all reproach?

"*Eh! parbleu!* to have remained in Paris until his marriage with Virginie was well and duly celebrated, and then—and then—*ma foi!* so much the worse!"

But all this did not enlighten the situation, and dawn appeared before Lavenel had discovered anything better than to go to father Beuron's and force him by reiterated pleadings, to fix the publication of the banns for the following Sunday. Then he would see!

Lavenel did not think without a little chill of what he *would* see that day, on his Artemesia's part, who would have become an Ariadne—but he had a week to prepare himself for it.

“Why the devil does she hold so much to marrying me, when all Diçlette knows she is in love with the actor?” said our poor friend to himself again. He ignored that jealousy and self-love were more powerful in the widow's heart than the voice of passion itself.

“And then what an unfortunate idea she had to make me go to her house at night, just when that drunken Mamertin was crossing the square! He will talk, and it is very probable it will do me harm in father Beuron's eyes! Oh! but when I shall have Virginie's papers, there will be no way of getting them from me!”

This thought alone gave Lavenel a little peace, and he went to sleep at last, towards sunrise.

He woke up late, and jumped out of his bed in great haste. Was he not to have gone to dine with father Beuron that day? It was only by not losing a minute that he would arrive in time.

While he was hurrying to dress himself with all his might, he approached the window to see what kind of weather it was, and what did he see? The collector's

tilbury, driven by one of the tavern servant-men, carrying off as fast as a good horse could trot, Madame Aubier herself, as fat as ever, wrapped up in numberless shawls, and her face beaming with delight.

"There is something going on!" said Theodore Lavenel to himself, who upset everything around him in his consternation, and lost a quarter of an hour in disengaging his suspenders that were terribly entangled.

In spite of his haste, half-past eleven o'clock sounded on the old, cracked town-clock before he had finished harnessing; he climbed into his *carriole*, whipped his horse and set off at full gallop. At the end of twenty minutes his horse lost a shoe, which obliged him to go at a more quiet gait, and he arrived at father Beuron's in a piteous state, an hour behindhand and very vexed. As he entered the room he saw a sight that stopped him on the threshold. Madame Aubier, seated near Virginie's father, was tapping him gently on his left hand, in order to engrave the better in his mind the phrases she was reading out loud from a piece of singular-looking blue paper which Lavenel, thanks to his worldly knowledge, recognized as a telegram. Virginie, rosy and smiling, was leaning her hands on her father's shoulder, resting her chin in them, and her lovely eyes were carefully following the characters imprinted by the machine on the small bands of white paper. Madame Beuron, who was less cross than usual, wore rather a pleased look, and what was miraculous, they had not yet thought of dining, although it was long past one o'clock.

The noise that Lavenel made as he entered changed this pretty picture with astonishing rapidity; their brows became elbuded and their looks disturbed, but Madame Aubier recovered herself very quickly.

"Good-morning, Master Lavenel," said she over her spectacles to the new-comer, and then continued her reading.

"Madame Masson asks of Monsieur Beuron his daughter's hand for her only son and heir, Eugène. She gives her son the furniture for his house, and an income of four thousand francs in government securities in five per cents., and does not demand any other *dot* than that which the young lady will inherit from her mother's property. Do not lose a moment; the necessary papers are sent by mail. Reply by telegram. Answer paid, forty words."

"VERROY."

Lavenel listened, and what was worse, understood perfectly.

"What is that?" said he, approaching.

"It is a telegram I received a short time ago," answered Madame Aubier, showing him the paper.

"That?" said Lavenel, incredulously, "that is not a telegram: it is much too long for one!"

This observation nearly compromised everything: father Beuron, struck with the justice of the argument, cast a doubtful look on the paper, and then on Madame Aubier, and repeated:

"In truth, it is much too long for one!"

With an impatient movement Madame Aubier drew out of her pocket the torn envelope which bore her name and the word *Telegram*.

"And this," said she, "what is this?"

"It is true, it is a telegram," replied father Beuron.

Lavenel felt that he had lost the first throw.

"But it is much too long for one!" he obstinately repeated; "telegrams never contain more than twenty words; I have sent some—they cost twenty *sous*."

"There is four francs worth on this!" replied Madame Aubier, triumphantly; "and forty *sous* for the answer pre-paid—that makes six francs."

"They are very rich," murmured the grain merchant, bitterly, beaten for a second time.

"Madame Masson stops at nothing, where her son is concerned," said Madame Aubier. "Well! Beuron, come, is it settled?"

"But," said the landowner, "I have almost promised Lavenel—"

"Almost! You entirely promised me, and I have come to get the papers for the publication of the banns."

"But the little one did not wish it!" observed Madame Aubier.

Virginie raised her head proudly and gave Lavenel a negative sign which was impossible for him to mistake.

"I never wanted it," said she in her clear voice.

"Come, Madame Beuron, you promised to help me," said Lavenel, in extremity, turning towards the step-mother.

"What do you want me to say?" replied the latter;

"you asked for a *dof*, the gentleman takes her without one; we will therefore gain three thousand francs, and that is worth considering."

"And then," said Madame Aubier, "he has four thousand francs income in five per cents.; that is nice; one knows what it is, whilst in business there are always ups and downs."

Lavenel irresolutely rubbed his two thumbs together for a moment.

"Well, if that is the case," said he, "then I shall go home. Good-morning, gentlemen, ladies and the company."

"Why, no," said father Beuron, "you need not get angry on account of this: stay and eat some soup with us; you will not marry our daughter, but that is no reason why we should quarrel."

Lavenel hesitated for an instant; then taking it into account that he had not four thousand francs income, he concluded by thinking that these people had done rightly, and that had he been in their place, he would have done the same; besides, had he not given the example of it in leaving Philomène for Virginie, without any other excuse than his better interest? He sat down beside Madame Aubier and took his part at the feast.

Virginie's godmother did not lose any time in needless compliments. As soon as the cloth was removed she left, and as she had a kind heart, she brought back Lavenel in the collector's tilbury, leaving the tavern servant-man to drive home the lame mare slowly. Madame Aubier went

to the telegraph-station to send off her answer, whilst the rejected admirer returned to his mother to tell her of his mischance.

"It is unfortunate," said the old woman, "but I felt sure the little Beuron would not marry you. They are obstinate, those girls, that are brought up like duchesses, and they are worth nothing at all at housekeeping. What are you going to do?"

"I am going to see Philomène," replied the clear-headed man, "and to-morrow morning at that. I snubbed her last night; it will have done her good."

It had not done her good, contrary to Lavenel's surmises. He had hardly left her dwelling before, drawing towards her the Captain's portfolio, which served on great occasions, Madame Crépin abandoned herself to the most profound meditation. After thinking for about half an hour, she found herself sufficiently prepared, and dipping her pen in some muddy ink, she wrote four great pages without stopping to take breath, in which orthography abandoned itself to some perilous flights, but wherein feeling overflowed in such a way as to make one forget such small clouds on a sky of tenderest azure.

After having finished her letter, without taking the trouble to copy it, for Philomène had never any doubts about herself, she wrote the address with a bold hand, passed her tongue delicately over the glue on the envelope, closed it, put a stamp on it upside-down, and then contemplated her work with evident satisfaction.

The letter made a very good effect on the portfolio, by

the vacillating light of a dull candle, but it had not been written to remain there. It was not late. Philomène, without taking the trouble to throw a shawl over her shoulders, went straight to the letter-box, that modest and discreet confidant of all secrets, and let her work disappear in the little gulf that is always wide open.

"Ah!" said she, as she closed the door and pushed the bolt, "they wish to prevent my attaining my ends! Well, my friends, although you made me leave, you will not have the last word!"

When Lavenel, faithful to his determination, presented himself at the widow's house, he went to offer peace, and he found war.

"What!" said she to him, "you come here, after the things you said to me day before yesterday, and you think I am in a humor to support it? Go where you are well received! Go to Virginie Beuron! I saw you go off yesterday, and then return with Madame Aubier; she does not hide herself when she goes to see her goddaughter! Return there: that is the best thing for you to do."

"Philomène," returned Theodore Lavenel, "you do not know what you are saying. I did go to father Beuron's yesterday, it is true, and I did not hide myself, for one has a right to go where business calls one—but it was not for Virginie."

"And for whom, then?"

"For no one!"

Philomène, for all answer, snapped her fingers disdainfully, and turned her back on her interlocutor. This

latter, who was vexed, had a stroke of genius. He could humiliate the widow more than she had ever humiliated him—with one word he could both clear himself and give her intense pain. How could he resist it? And you, dear readers, would you not have done the same in his place?

"The proof," said he, softly, looking at her sideways, "the proof that I do not go there for Virginie is, that I can tell you a piece of news—"

Philomène, overcome by curiosity, turned her head a little.

"She is going to be married."

"Ah!" said Madame Crépin, turning round entirely.

"You do not know to whom?"

"No."

"You cannot guess?"

Philomène, who prided herself on her perspicacity, sought a little but found nothing.

"Do you wish me to tell you?"

"Certainly."

"To your friend, Monsieur Masson."

"It is not true!" cried Philomène, springing forward.

"It is not true!"

She leaned on the corner of her bureau, but she raised her arm at once, for the sharp angle of a pointed shell, placed there for people to see, cut her elbow. She wished to put on a bold face, and to hide the trembling which made her totter on her feet; she seized a chair violently, struck it on the floor and sat down on it.

"It is perfectly true," continued Lavenel, enchanted at

his success. "They have adored each other since last summer, it seems. Monsieur Masson is rich; his mother has given him an income so that he can leave the theatre."

Masson rich! Masson with an income! And it was Virginie who was going to have all that!

"It is not true!" the widow repeated, faintly, clinging to her incredulity like a drowning man to a straw floating on the water.

"Nothing is truer. He was in such a hurry—poor Monsieur Masson—that he sent his proposal by telegraph, and they answered him in the same way. That is an odd way of arranging marriages! Hey! what do you think of it, Madame Crépin?"

Philomène was thinking of her letter that had probably arrived, and was saying to herself that she would give La Heuserie to be able to get it back again before it was unsealed. But, like many other institutions, the post does not return what is confided to it—unless it may be money—and in that respect it does differ from other institutions.

"I say that it is a lie and a calumny," said she, with her face on fire, and her throat dry.

"A lie—if I had not been witness to the whole affair, I should say it might be—but a calumny—Madame Crépin, tell me how it is a calumny, and against whom? Marriage does wrong to no one! By the way, it is on Sunday that our banns will be published, at the same time with Monsieur Masson's and Virginie's, will they not?"

"Neither Sunday nor ever!" exclaimed Philomène, in a fury. "Go to the devil! I will not marry you."

"And you will do well, *ma foi!*" cried Lavenel, exasperated in his turn by jealousy at seeing his betrothed's anger, which he attributed, not without cause, to the depth of the wound he had made. "I am not one to marry a woman who is silly enough to fall in love with a man younger than herself, and as much suited to her as our cock is for planting peas!"

Irritated beyond all human speech, Madame Crépin threw her front door wide open, and drew aside, to indicate to Lavenel that he would do well to leave.

"Your servant!" said the latter, giving a flourishing bow with his hat.

He passed out quickly, with his hands in his pockets, and went off with a conquering air until he reached his house, where having entered, and being sheltered from indiscreet eyes, he began to kick things about on every side, until all the chairs were on the floor. After which, having no servants, he picked them up, one by one, put them on their feet, sat down on the best one, and mused pitifully.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AN EXTRAORDINARY LETTER.

MADAME AUBIER'S telegram reached the Verroys' house too late in the evening for them to send and inform Masson about it. It was not until the next day that they sent for him, and about eleven o'clock in the morning, our friends being gathered together in the dining-room, gave themselves over to all the joyous merriment with which the success of their undertaking inspired them. Masson was wild to leave, and the three days of patience to which he was condemned seemed interminably long to him. Suddenly he drew a letter from his pocket, and presented it to Marie.

"I received that this morning," said he, "and I understand nothing about it. Can you explain this sudden friendship, and these 'plaints of a prisoned bird to me?"

He presented a letter, in its torn envelope, to Madame Verroy, who, at her first glance, and even before seeing the handwriting, exclaimed:

"Philomène! I recognize her way of wiping the blots with her little finger; there is one on the back of the envelope, in the corner."

"It is true! I had not remarked it," said Masson, laughing. "Is it an inveterate habit with her, then?"

"She could not write without it; she would think

she had made faults in orthography else," Charles answered.

"Ah! there are some," continued Masson; "but read it. The contents are curious—not more so than its appearance, however." ^

Marie read out loud:

"DEAR MONSIEUR MASSON:

"I promised, when I should be far away from you, to write to you—"

"Did you ever ask her to do so?"

"Never in all my life."

"It is a purely gratuitous promise, and, therefore, the more meritorious," said Charles. "Continue, my dear wife."

"—I keep my promise, although I have nothing very interesting to tell you. I found my house and all my small surroundings as they were before I left, excepting that everything was very damp—"

"She ought not to have stayed away so long," Charles interrupted. "Continue."

"—I have not been here long, and yet it seems to me that it is a century since I returned; the time that I spent in Paris is like a dream to me, and I much fear that I can never accustom myself to Diélette again—"

"A blot wiped out with her finger," said Charles, who was looking at the letter from the corner of his eye.

"No, Charles, it is not a blot; it's a word scratched out."

"Go on; so much the better." • •

"—Everything seems dull and ugly to me here; in order to like this place, I am obliged to recall to myself, that you found extraordinary beauty in it, which I do not discover. Ah! my dear friend, life is very hard for a woman alone in the world, and isolated, whose tastes place her above the society that surrounds her—"

"Ah! ah! ah!" said Charles.

"—And who has known no happiness for many years, except the time she passed in Paris—"

"Why, she writes like Madame de Sevigné!"

"—The souvenir of the friendship you showed me, the delicate attentions that you paid me—"

"What! did you pay her delicate attentions? That's fine! I shall tell Virginie about it."

"Let me enjoy the reading, please," said Masson, with the most amusing shrug of his shoulders. "In your wife's mouth, those phrases take a poetical turn that I did not find they possessed on paper."

"—Is the only joy I know at present, and I love to recall those delicious moments. No, I do not like what surrounds me here; I cannot find anything beautiful in the gray stones of the cliffs, or the sands of the downs; what I would love, were I not condemned to live in a

place I detest, among people who cannot understand me, would be a little, modest house in Paris, where I could have the happiness of seeing you sometimes, and to know that I had a few friends about me, whilst here I am all alone—”

“And Lavenel, what has she done with him?” said the incorrigible interrupter.

“—You will answer me, will you not, my dear friend? I have had confidence in your friendly words; you will not cause me the sorrow of a disappointment that would, perhaps, be the bitterest of all the sorrows of my life!

“Your faithful friend,

“PHILOMÈNE CRÉPIN,

“née HENSEY.”

“What does that mean?” repeated Masson, with his eyes lost in vacancy, and his chin in the palm of his hand.

“You, also, are too stupid!” said Charles, contemptuously.

“How? People declare that I have some wit—just a little.”

“You are too stupid, if you do not see what that turtle-dove in quest of a mate wishes.”

“What?”

“Don’t you see that she wishes to marry you, body and soul?”

“I?” exclaimed Masson, taking his head in his hands.

“I?” he repeated, in a vexed tone, that made his two

friends burst out laughing. "Oh! the old idiot! But, say, it is nothing but an absurd joke."

"Nothing is truer in the world."

"Seriously?"

"On my word of honor!"

Masson took his hands slowly away from his head, which they had been still clasping, and let them fall on his knees with such a despairing expression that the young people's hilarity redoubled.

"What did I ever do to her," said he, "that she should so turn me into ridicule?"

"That, my friend," said Charles, "is a secret between your conscience and yourself."

"What must I answer her?" said the unfortunate fellow.

"I will take charge of it; I am going to write to her:

"MY DEAR COUSIN:

"Masson has received your letter; he begs me to thank you for the devoted affection you have been so kind as to show him; he cannot do so himself, because he is absorbed with the preparations for his marriage with Virginie Beuron—a marriage that does not surprise you, I am sure; for, with your usual cleverness, you must have suspected their plans—"

"Charles!" exclaimed Marie, "you are pitiless."

"Justice is serene and implacable, my dear; that is, what makes its strength and its beauty! The plaintive Philomène will soon hear from me!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

TURNING THE TABLES.

HOWEVER, it was not Charles who undertook to announce Masson's marriage to the unhappy Madame Crépin, but Marie, rather, who tried to make the best of it; but although she hid the bitter pill under a quantity of sweetest preserves, the fact existed, and the blow was rude.

When she received the letter, Philomène remained for a long while motionless and dumb; the anger of having allowed herself to be so grossly mistaken, the jealous fury of a woman who is disdained for another, the realization of the ridicule she had so weakly brought upon herself, put her into such an indescribable, violent state of mind, that she might have died of suffocation from its effects, had not Heaven reserved another destiny for her. In spite of Lavenel's affirmations she had doubted it all till then—not daring to go to see Madame Aubier, and refusing to believe the village gossip. This blow, although it had been foreseen, affected her tremendously.

When she had recovered her calmness a little, her first impulse was to tear her cousin's letter into a thousand pieces and to stamp on them with rage; then she bestowed upon her the least flattering epithets possible. It was

Marie's fault, certainly. Had she not persisted, in spite of Philomène's advice, in inviting that silly Virginie to her house, who now took from her something much more than the object of her romantic love—the crowning of a life full of wasted ambition!

The blow was a terrible one; all the more, however, because Madame Crépin would never really feel it, thanks to the thick iron-coating of pride that protected her. Marie's pity, in announcing the news to her in a thousand cautious terms that were full of delicate feeling, had all been in vain; her kind words of consolation, of reason and affection were all lost upon her; her cousin did not in the least appreciate them; far from that, she found an express insult, a marked determination to lay blame upon her in them.

What would she not have given to have been able to have taken back her useless confession? But accomplished facts are pitiless, and neither let themselves be softened nor bribed, and the confession subsisted.

“Bah!” thought Philomène, “if she ever speaks to me about it again, I will tell her that it is she who is deceived, and that I never spoke to her about it.”

Full of a noble pride, the result of her strength, she took her best pen, and with the addition of a few blots, she wrote what follows:

“MY DEAR MARIE:—I have just received your letter, and for more than three hours I have been sitting in the

same place reading it over, and asking myself if it were really you who wrote it. What I told you in regard to Masson has been interpreted by yourself in a way so distant from my thought, that I ask myself whether I am not dreaming? Who ever could have thought that I had any other feelings for him, save those of a sister? Certainly, I did tell you that he resembled my husband, and that that resemblance had inspired me with the deepest affection for him, but there was nothing in that to give you cause for filling me with shame by attributing feelings to me of which I am incapable.

"I hope sincerely you have had enough good sense not to have told any one about the suppositions you have made, and the feelings you have lent me in your imagination, for, although I believe those who know me are clever enough not to give any credence to such improbable ideas, it would not be pleasant for me to think that any one could believe me capable of wishing to marry a man younger than myself. Thank Heaven! I have not yet been obliged to blush in any one's presence, and undeserved calumnies should not draw down upon me this shame.

"I remain your devoted cousin,

"PHILOMÈNE CRÉPIN,

"née HENSEY."

When Madame Verroy received this letter she was alone. She read it over several times, rubbing her eyes

at each phrase; then she turned it over in all its different meanings, but it remained the same thing in no matter what light she looked at it, and the young woman not being able to make up her mind about the extraordinary letter, laid it aside to await her husband's return.

Charles read it; and then returned it to his wife, smiling.

"Does it amuse you?" said Marie to him, a little annoyed at seeing the effect that what had so upset her produced on him.

"I find it very droll and very natural; yes, it amuses me, for her injurious words cannot harm us, and as a study it is an interesting subject."

"It is a final quarrel," sighed Marie.

"Heaven be praised for it! That woman would have eaten up our last farthing if that good Masson had not frustrated her. We will be indebted to him for this all our lives. Unfortunately, he did not do it on purpose."

"I was very fond of her, however," murmured the young woman, regretfully.

"You had your trouble for nothing!" her husband concluded in manner of consolation. "You will love Virginie in her stead, and you will benefit by the exchange, I assure you."

Virginie's name and memory were a talisman for those who knew her. One could not think of her without feeling the charm of her sweet beauty and loving heart.

Philomène's image was banished from the fireside where she had endeavored to bring sorrow, and no one thought anything more about her at the end of a week's time.

Madame Crépin, however, was a prey to a thousand anguishes. She had driven Lavenel away in a moment of anger—and now disagreeable reports in regard to herself came back to her. The grain merchant had been seen coming out of her house on the fatal night she had enticed him there; people spoke about it discreetly, but smilingly; her good friends were not sparing in their taunts to her, and certain very straight-laced dames, in the best society of the place, feigned when they met her not to see her, so that they would not be obliged to bow to her.

"Must I marry him in order to repair my reputation?" Philomène asked herself one day. "I detest him, however, very much. *Mon Dieu!* how I do detest him! If I catch him I will make him pay for all his disagreeable actions."

By a touching coincidence Lavenel at that very moment whipped his mare who had been newly shodden, for he was thinking of Philomène, and the poor beast, who was trotting her best however, completed the illusion by kicking in the shafts energetically, which did not ameliorate his condition.

The two disagreeable persons, whom Providence had so admirably designed to punish each other reciprocally for their faults, might have remained eternally separated but

for the intervention of some kind souls. Madame Aubier, who had married her goddaughter, and had nothing to do while the young couple were on their wedding journey, took pity one day on Madame Crépin's emaciated face and discomfited expression. This latter was really dying from anger and spite. She made allusion to Lavenel about his nocturnal interview with his betrothed, and to the harm the latter had suffered from it, and profiting by the fact that our friend had a pressing need for money, she ended by extracting a promise from him that he would make a new proposal.

Then Philomène's turn came, whom she influenced through her self-love and her anxiety about her reputation; moreover, Madame Lavenel, who had returned to more maternal sentiments, had showered attention and thoughtfulness upon her, so that one fine day the Mayor united forever these two beings who hated each other cordially, and who only had the most mediocre esteem for one another. Their home does not pass at Dielette for a small paradise.

A month had passed at this time since Masson and his wife, who had returned from their wedding trip in Maçonnais, had inhabited a pretty little house that was situated nearly on the edge of the beach, in which a thousand things unknown to the inhabitants of that country had grouped themselves together little by little, and had made a charming home. Besides, the room that had been Philomène's, was always ready for them, at Monsieur

and Madame Verroy's house whenever they had a fancy to pass three months in Paris.

Ask Masson, if you like, whether he regrets the theatre, and you will see what his answer will be !

Only, and this phenomena has not yet been explained—when the pious souls at X—— in Maçonnais congratulate Madame Masson on her son's return to family life, she begins her answer by smiling and ends it with a sigh. Does she by any chance regret his past renown ?

THE END.

